

Pragmatic Acts and Functions in Selected Divorce Proceedings in Oyo Town

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Abstract

In order to understand how litigants and attorneys strategically employ language to resolve marital disputes and sway court rulings, this study explores the pragmatic acts and communicative functions ingrained in divorce proceedings in Oyo Town. The study investigates how courtroom utterances function as socially situated actions shaped by institutional roles, procedural norms, and sociocultural expectations surrounding marriage and family responsibilities, drawing on Mey's Pragmatic Acts Theory (2001). Selected divorce proceeding excerpts from Oyo Town's High court make up the data, which are qualitatively analysed to find recurrent pragmatic acts and the contextual elements that allow for their interpretation. The analysis reveals three practices, and these include questioning/responding, complaining/justifying, and accusing. Similarly, three functions are revealed, and they are: Fact-establishing, grievance articulation, and blame-attribution functions. The findings further show that the interpretation of these utterances is deeply influenced by shared cultural ideologies concerning gender roles, family duties, and moral expectations within the Yoruba socio-cultural context. By highlighting the pragmatic mechanisms through which meaning and persuasion are constructed in divorce proceedings, the study contributes to the growing body of research on courtroom discourse and expands the application of this theory to institutional legal interactions in African contexts.

Keywords: Pragmatic Acts, State High Court, Legal Pragmatics, Respondent, Petitioner

Introduction

One of the most emotionally charged types of institutional interaction occurs during divorce proceedings, where moral arguments, legal arguments, and personal narratives come together in front of judges (Gibbons and Matoesian, 2018). In this context, participants use deliberate language choices to describe marital disputes, protect their reputations, assign blame, and demand

justice. As a result, statements made in court serve as both intentional social actions and statements of fact to influence legal interpretation and decisions. As speakers use language to support their positions and refute opposing claims, institutional discourse frequently reflects intricate negotiations of meaning and power, according to contemporary pragmatic scholarship (Ilie 2018; Archer, Aijmer, and Wichmann 2020). Therefore, analysing the pragmatic aspects of divorce proceedings offers important insights into how legal actors use language to carry out tasks and handle conflict in the courtroom.

In interpreting meaning and communicative intent, pragmatics emphasises the significance of context. Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Acts Theory emphasises that the social roles of the participants and the circumstances in which they are produced give utterances their power. Statements often serve as acts of accusation, defence, justification, pleading, and narration in court proceedings. Institutional authority, procedural rules, and the unequal power dynamics between litigants, attorneys, and judges all influence these practical actions. According to recent studies (Archer, Aijmer, and Wichmann 2020; Heffer, Rock, and Conley 2019), participants deliberately use language to establish credibility, persuade legal authorities, and shape judicial perception, making courtroom discourse intrinsically strategic. In a similar vein, Ayodabo (2018) points out that pragmatic inquiry is especially useful for analysing how utterances function in socially regulated contexts where communicative intentions have concrete outcomes.

Within the socio-cultural setting of Oyo Town, these communicative practices are further influenced by local ideologies surrounding marriage, gender relations, and family responsibilities. As a historically significant Yoruba community, Oyo reflects cultural expectations that shape how marital conflicts are narrated and evaluated in public forums. Litigants often frame their testimonies in ways that appeal to shared cultural norms of respect, responsibility, and moral conduct, while judges interpret these narratives within both legal and socio-cultural frameworks. Recent scholarship on legal discourse in African contexts highlights how courtroom communication frequently reflects the intersection of formal legal procedures and culturally embedded communicative practices (Okoye 2018; Nartey and Yankson 2020). By analysing the pragmatic acts embedded in divorce proceedings in Oyo Town, this study seeks to uncover how linguistic strategies are used to construct identities, negotiate moral authority, and influence judicial outcomes within a culturally informed legal environment.

Literature Review/ Statement of the Research Problem

Recent years have seen an increase in interest in courtroom discourse, particularly in the field of legal pragmatics, which examines how language functions in legal institutions to serve social and procedural purposes. Communication in the courtroom involves more than just exchanging facts; it also involves using language strategically to negotiate responsibility, authority, and credibility. Heffer, Rock, and Conley (2019) point out that institutional roles, power dynamics, and procedural norms have a big impact on how people formulate their statements in court. In a similar vein, Archer, Aijmer, and Wichmann (2020) contend that pragmatic analysis makes clear how legal actors use language resources to convince others, support their positions, and create narratives. Although these studies provide valuable insights into the relationship between language and institutional authority, they are largely situated within Western legal traditions and therefore insufficiently account for the socio-cultural realities that shape courtroom interactions in African societies. Their analyses foreground institutional power but pay relatively little attention to how cultural norms, communal expectations, and moral ideologies influence litigants' linguistic behaviour in divorce proceedings. Consequently, while these studies successfully explain the strategic nature of courtroom communication, they leave a contextual gap that the present study seeks to address within the socio-cultural environment of Oyo Town divorce proceedings.

The concept of pragmatic acts in pragmatic theory offers a useful framework for examining the functional elements of speech in institutional contexts. Scholars emphasise that speakers' roles, intentions, and communicative expectations impact pragmatic acts, building on Mey's (2001) claim. According to Nartey and Yankson (2020), courtroom participants frequently employ tactics like accusations, denials, and explanations to influence how events are interpreted. Similarly, Ilie (2018) notes that legal discourse often involves pragmatic manoeuvring, in which speakers purposefully craft their narratives to assert authority, refute opposing viewpoints, and conform to legal norms. Mey's position is reinforced by Ilie (2018) and Nartey and Yankson (2020). However, these studies largely discuss courtroom communication from generalised legal perspectives without specifically interrogating the unique communicative complexities of divorce litigation. Divorce proceedings differ significantly from criminal or political discourse because they are deeply emotional, morally sensitive, and culturally mediated. Therefore, while these studies adequately explain strategic language use in institutional discourse, they do not sufficiently address how litigants in marital disputes employ pragmatic acts to construct victimhood, negotiate moral

innocence, and justify personal decisions before the court. This limitation justifies the application of Pragmatic Acts Theory to the present study.

The influence of power dynamics on courtroom interactions has also been emphasised by research. Litigants find themselves in relatively weaker positions within this communicative framework, while judges and legal professionals typically hold institutional authority. Gibbons and Matoesian (2018) explain that these imbalances influence the linguistic behaviour of courtroom participants, leading litigants to rely on narrative explanations or emotional appeals, while legal professionals use formal discourse patterns to maintain control over proceedings. These dynamics demonstrate how pragmatic acts serve as tools for negotiating authority and legitimacy in sociocultural and legal contexts. The impact of sociocultural context on courtroom communication, particularly in African legal settings, is closely linked to institutional power dynamics. Researchers have observed that formal legal procedures and deeply rooted communication practices interact in legal discourse in many African societies. According to Okoye (2018), courtroom interactions in African contexts are frequently impacted by social hierarchies, shared cultural expectations, and communal norms that influence how participants present their arguments and testimonies. In a similar vein, Nartey and Yankson (2020) contend that when narrating their experiences or defending their actions in court, speakers frequently refer to moral standards and culturally shared values. In divorce cases, where morality, gender roles, and family responsibilities have a significant impact on the language used to express and evaluate marital disputes, this interaction between legal procedures and sociocultural norms is especially noticeable. These studies remain broad in scope and do not specifically focus on divorce proceedings, where cultural beliefs about marriage, gender responsibility, child care, and morality become particularly prominent. Thus, while they successfully foreground the role of sociocultural context in legal discourse, they do not sufficiently explain how such contexts shape the specific pragmatic acts of accusing, complaining, justifying, and defending in marital conflict litigation. The present study therefore extends these discussions by examining how culturally embedded communicative strategies function within divorce proceedings in Oyo Town.

The importance of prosodic and paralinguistic components in courtroom discourse has also been examined in recent studies. Sogunro, Ayinuola, and Agboola (2024) explore the pragmatics of prosodic features, particularly how intonation conveys pragmatic meaning, in their analysis of a few courtroom exchanges. According to their findings, contextual cues and tone variations play

important pragmatic roles in courtroom interactions. Notably, it has been demonstrated that a variety of pragmatic implications, including commands, calls to order, questions, affirmations, warnings, comic relief, agreement, frustration or anger, instruction, clarifications, and expressions of shock or surprise, can be indicated by intonational patterns. This study shows that prosodic characteristics greatly influence meaning and promote interaction in courtroom settings, going beyond word choice. Their study broadens the understanding of courtroom communication beyond lexical choice by showing how prosody contributes to commands, warnings, clarification, agreement, and emotional expression. However, the study mainly concentrates on general courtroom exchanges and does not critically examine how prosodic features operate within emotionally charged divorce proceedings. In marital disputes, paralinguistic cues may function not only as interactional devices but also as indicators of emotional suffering, frustration, defensiveness, or attempts at persuasion. Therefore, although the study provides an important foundation for understanding prosodic meaning in courtroom discourse, it leaves unexplored the connection between prosodic features and the negotiation of marital responsibility in divorce litigation.

When examining courtroom discourse, these studies collectively highlight the importance of taking paralinguistic resources and socio-cultural context into account. They contend that legal communication includes prosodic cues and culturally aware communication techniques that improve statement interpretation and institutional interaction management, in addition to formal legal language. These insights are particularly relevant when analysing pragmatic acts in divorce proceedings, where speakers frequently use expressive tools and culturally rooted narratives to justify actions, articulate grievances, and negotiate responsibility before the court.

Divorce procedures in Nigerian courts have gotten comparatively little attention, despite the growing interest in legal pragmatics. The majority of current research has mostly focused on legislative communication, political discourse, or criminal trials. Our knowledge of how pragmatic acts operate in marital dispute litigation is lacking as a result of this oversight, particularly in culturally significant places like Oyo Town. This study contributes to broader conversations about language, law, and culture in African contexts and enhances scholarship on courtroom discourse by analysing these pragmatic acts in divorce cases.

Scholars of legal pragmatics focus on how courtroom discourse is influenced by institutional roles, participant power dynamics, and deliberate language choices. Heffer, Rock, and Conley (2019)

claim that courtroom interactions adhere to procedural norms and hierarchical authority, which affect how speakers tell their stories. Similarly, Archer, Aijmer, and Wichmann (2020) claim that legal actors purposefully use language strategies to persuade judges and bolster their claims. These points of view emphasise the significance of looking at courtroom communication from a pragmatic standpoint. Studies like this one have different analytical focuses even though they are situated within the courtroom context. This study distinguishes itself by concentrating primarily on pragmatic acts and functions, a subject that has not received enough attention in earlier studies. Furthermore, Ilie (2018) examined pragmatics perspective on legal discourse, and data were analysed to demonstrate pragmatic concepts such as persuasion, legal communication, and speech acts. This study and the current study are similar in so many ways, such as context, focus on legal discourse and the adoption of a pragmatic perspective to emphasise meaning making. The area of divergence is in the scope and the research designs of the researchers. Ilie's (2018) research adopted a theoretical and conceptual approach, while the current work adopted empirical data obtained from actual divorce proceedings.

Also, Chen (2018), Moeketsi (1999), and Widodo et al. (2025) examined language use in criminal trials; Conley & William (1998), Coulthard (2017), and Drew (1992) researched courtroom discourse; Walton (2008), Cotterill (2003), and Coulthard & Johnson (2007) examined legal context strategies and general institutional communication. These research studies shared context with the current research, but how litigants employ pragmatic acts like accusations, defences, and justifications during divorce proceedings in Nigerian courts has not received enough scholarly attention. This study aims to bridge this gap by looking at pragmatic acts and functions in divorce cases in Oyo Town.

Aim and Objectives

This research aims to explore the Pragmatic acts and functions in divorce proceedings in Oyo Town. The objectives are to:

- iii. Identify the practs employed by individuals in the divorce proceedings in Oyo Town;
and
- iv. analyse the functions these practs serve in the selected divorce proceedings

Methodology

The data for this study were collected through purposeful sampling of divorce case files from the State High Court in Oyo. Two audio-recorded divorce proceedings in 2025 were observed by the researcher, which yielded texts for analysis. These audio-recorded proceedings were purposively chosen due to the richness of linguistic information that they contain in relation to the research goals. As this study uses the qualitative pragmatic framework, more attention was paid to in-depth analysis of information rather than its quantity. Various pragmatic moves, including questions, accusations, defences, pleas, explanations, and judges' remarks, among others, were found in the selected proceedings. Besides, they have been chosen for their clear recording, easy accessibility, and relevance to divorce courtroom communication in Oyo Town. The selected proceedings were manually transcribed through repeated listening to the audio recordings, with the utterances of parties being documented. The data were analysed using the pragmatic acts framework, with a focus on speech functions. The communicative intent, contextual meaning, and social roles of the participants were all carefully considered when analysing each statement. This analysis showed how language is used in the courtroom to negotiate roles and outcomes and carry out social actions. The study was carried out strictly in accordance with ethical guidelines. To protect people's privacy, all personal identifiers were removed, and the relevant court authorities granted access. The data was kept confidential and utilised exclusively for academic purposes. Overall, the methodology employed in this study demonstrates how pragmatic acts in divorce proceedings reflect broader social norms, power dynamics, and communication strategies within the cultural context of Oyo Town.

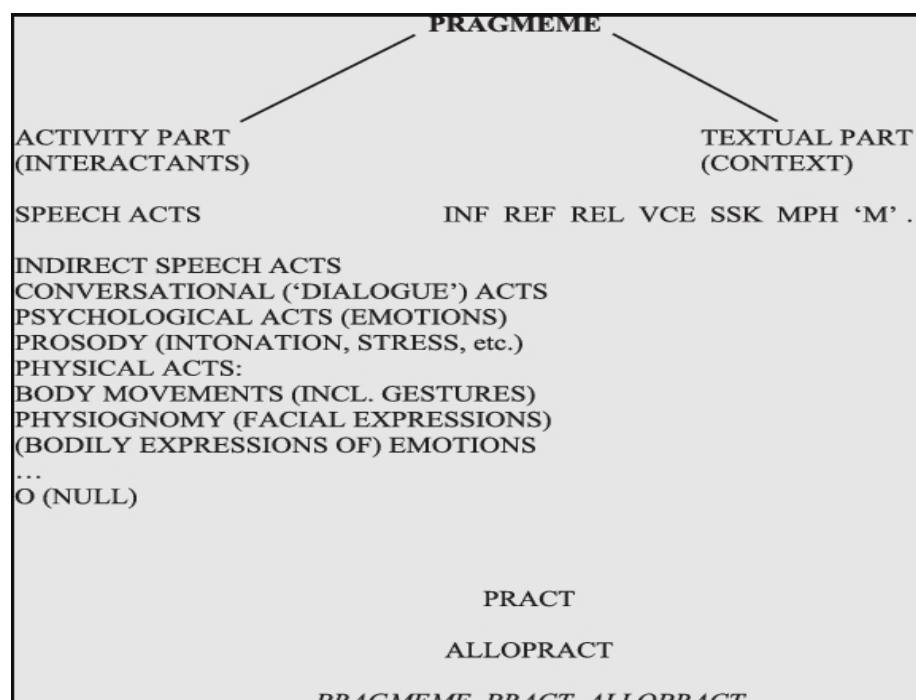
Theoretical Framework

The main theoretical framework for analysing communicative behaviour and meaning-making during divorce proceedings is pragmatic act theory, which was first presented by Mey in 2001. Pragmatic Act Theory situates language use within its sociocultural, situational, and contextual contexts, in contrast to conventional speech act theories. It emphasises how participants collaboratively create meaning in discourse through their shared background knowledge, culture, and situational realities rather than merely relying on linguistic forms. The concept of a *pragmeme*, a dynamic and context-specific unit of language use, is also introduced by the theory. Context-driven pragmatic acts, which include a range of communicative techniques like referring, inferring, implicating, presupposing, and attending to face needs, are how *pragmemes* are expressed.

A Model of Pragmatic

Both activities and textual practices that contribute to meaning are included in this theory. The activity exercises give language users a variety of communication options. With INF standing for inference, REF for relevance, VCE for voice, SSK for shared situational knowledge, MPH for metaphor, and M for a meta-pragmatic joker, the textual element emphasises the contextual elements that affect communication. Both the interactants and the environments in which they function are crucial to comprehending a pragmeme.

This theoretical framework is especially useful for examining the particular, situation-specific pragmatic tactics used by witnesses, attorneys, and litigants in divorce proceedings. Courtroom statements are viewed through the prism of pragmatic act theory as calculated actions intended to accomplish social objectives like blaming, defending identity, asserting rights, voicing complaints, or convincing the court. Gender relationships, power dynamics, sociocultural norms, and institutional expectations all frequently have an impact on these behaviours. This study attempts to clarify how pragmatic functions such as blaming, justifying, requesting, and asserting identity appear in the courtroom by using pragmatic act theory. This method reveals the social and ideological underpinnings of courtroom communication in a Nigerian context while also improving our comprehension of linguistic behaviour in legal contexts.



A Model of Pragmatic Acts (Mey 2001: 222)

Data Analysis

Introduction

The pragmatic acts ingrained in courtroom interactions during Oyo Town divorce proceedings are the main focus of this analysis. It focuses especially on how participants strategically employ language to carry out communicative actions in a legal setting. The study investigates how utterances function within their situational and institutional environments using Mey's (2001) pragmatic acts theory as the analytical framework. As a result, the analysis highlights the relationship between language choices, pragmatic purposes, and courtroom objectives.

Practs Inherent in the Selected Divorce Proceedings

Divorce proceedings involve a range of pragmatic acts through which participants present claims, challenge opposing narratives, and negotiate responsibilities. These three practs emerge from the interaction between petitioners, respondents, legal practitioners, and judges within the courtroom setting. The acts are shaped by legal procedures, power relations, and the communicative goals of the participants. Through these interactions, language performs specific pragmatic functions that contribute to the resolution of marital disputes.

1. Pract of Questioning/Responding

Questioning and responding represent a central pragmatic pattern in courtroom discourse, particularly during cross-examination sessions. Through this pract, legal practitioners seek clarification, elicit relevant information, and guide testimonies toward issues important to the court. The responses provided by litigants often serve to justify claims, explain circumstances, or support legal arguments. As a result, questioning and responding function as crucial mechanisms for constructing narratives and establishing facts in divorce proceedings.

Function of the Pract of Questioning/Responding

Fact-Establishing Function

The pract of questioning/responding performs a directive and fact-establishing function in courtroom discourse. Within the framework of Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Acts Theory, such utterances operate as institutional acts designed to elicit relevant information necessary for legal evaluation. Rather than serving as casual inquiries, questions posed by legal practitioners guide the flow of proceedings and prompt litigants to provide details that support judicial decision-making. Through this pract, the court obtains information about issues such as child welfare,

financial responsibility, and the duration of marital relationships. The responses provided by litigants also function as evidence that informs the court's assessment of parental obligations and marital responsibilities.

Excerpt 1

Lawyer: How much are you suggesting to the court to be the contribution of the respondent for the education and welfare of the child?

Petitioner: I want 200k per month. This will also cover the child's JSS3 exam fees

The statements made by the petitioner and a lawyer during a cross-examination session are reflected in these excerpts. The remarks include methods of questioning and answering that are mainly intended to obtain information that is essential to the court's decision-making process. They serve a purpose beyond simple inquiry, even though they are presented as interrogative sentences. These comments are appropriate given the larger context of courtroom discourse, where decisions about child custody, maintenance, and support are being made.

From a pragmatic perspective, this exchange exemplifies contextual adaptation, a crucial component of Mey's (2001) pragmatic acts theory. Using precise and institutional terms like "contribution," "respondent," and "education and welfare of the child," both speakers modify their language to fit the formal requirements of the courtroom. These word choices stress the gravity of the legal system and the impact of legal terminology. These statements represent a pragmeme about assessing parental responsibility in terms of pragmemes and practices. The practice of questioning serves as a means of obtaining information, and the answers have an informative and justifying function that helps the court assess the child's financial obligations.

Excerpt 2

Judge: How long did your courtship last?

Petitioner: One year, sir

According to the excerpt above, the judge's remark is an example of a questioning technique that is mainly used to obtain information. It seeks to compile precise background information about the couple's relationship history, especially with regard to the length of time they were courted prior to getting married. Such information may be crucial in a divorce case so that the court can assess the quality or depth of the couple's premarital relationship and determine whether there were early indications of instability.

"One year, sir" is the petitioner's succinct, courteous response that follows the cooperative communication principle. The petitioner satisfies the institutional requirements of courtroom discourse by politely and directly answering the question. This also shows an awareness of the power dynamics that exist in these kinds of settings, where the judge is in a position of superior evaluation. A common adjacency pair of question and answer in institutional discourse is highlighted by the dialogue's structure. The formal courtroom setting, where language must be precise, succinct, and relevant to the case at hand, also has an impact on this exchange.

2. Pract of Complaining and Justifying

Complaining and justifying are common pragmatic acts in divorce proceedings where litigants narrate experiences that explain the breakdown of their marriages. Through these practs, speakers present grievances while simultaneously providing reasons that legitimise their decision to seek separation. Such utterances combine emotional expression with attempts to persuade the court that the marital dissolution is justified.

Function of Pract of Complaining/Justifying

Grievance Articulation Function

This is a persuasive strategy through which litigants narrate personal grievances or complaints while legitimising their decisions or actions. Complaints reveal experiences of emotional, psychological, or moral suffering, thereby constructing a narrative of hardship that helps the court understand the causes of marital breakdown. At the same time, the justificatory element defends the speaker's actions, such as leaving the matrimonial home or seeking divorce, by presenting them as reasonable responses to intolerable circumstances. In pragmatic terms, these practs serve both expressive and argumentative functions, allowing the speaker to shift responsibility to the respondent while appealing to the court's sense of fairness and justice (Mey 2001).

Excerpt 3

I left the house because of his constant threat, nagging and
abusive nature to my life. Even me, I can't live with a lion

In light of a sociocultural and legal framework that recognizes abuse as a valid reason for separation or divorce, the aforementioned passage exemplifies the practical act of complaining and defending. By depicting the speaker as a victim and the respondent as unsuitable for friendship or family life, it draws on both interpersonal and institutional ideologies.

The statement essentially justifies the speaker's decision to leave the marital residence. Her decision is rationally justified by the statement, "I left the house because of his constant threats, nagging, and abusive nature towards my life," which frames it as an act of self-preservation rather than defiance or irresponsibility. The speaker presents herself as a victim whose departure was forced by unbearable circumstances by emphasizing ongoing emotional and psychological harm. This is consistent with what Mey describes as an act shaped by power dynamics and cultural expectations for survival and rooted in real-life social relevance.

Excerpt 4

I was deceived into the marriage. He even lied about his genotype throughout our courtship.

This excerpt illustrates the practice of complaining and justifying. The petitioner accuses the respondent of deception regarding his genotype, an issue with serious health and marital implications in many Nigerian socio-cultural contexts. By emphasising this misrepresentation, the speaker frames the marriage as one founded on falsehood and betrayal. Pragmatically, the utterance serves both as a complaint and as a justification for seeking divorce. Within Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Acts Theory, the statement functions as a context-dependent practice that aligns with the courtroom activity of establishing responsibility for the marital breakdown while positioning the petitioner as a victim of deception.

Excerpt 5

The foundation of this marriage is lies. I was deceived into the marriage. He lied about his genotype throughout our courtship, and I didn't get to know the truth until I gave birth to our first child when she was tested and she is SS

This narrative highlights the act of whining and rationalising. The petitioner claims that the respondent misled him about his genotype, which has serious implications for marriage and health in different sociocultural contexts in Nigeria. The speaker presents the marriage as based on deceit and lies by highlighting this falsehood. Practically speaking, the statement functions as both a grievance and a justification for filing for divorce. This claim functions as a context-dependent practice that aligns with the courtroom's role in assigning blame for the dissolution of the marriage while portraying the petitioner as a victim of deceit, according to Mey's (2001) pragmatic acts theory.

Excerpt 6

See, when we were together, I felt completely alone. He is physically present but emotionally absent. He did not participate in the day-to-day care of our child, and didn't even provide any support expected of him.

The act of complaining is demonstrated in the excerpt above. It expresses a feeling of discontent that stems from emotional suffering. The emotional distress persists even though the complaint relates to a previous incident. This statement resulted from the speaker's experience of an emotional detachment within the marriage. The speaker's extreme psychological distress is made clear by this act. Additionally, the phrases "He did not get involved in taking care of our child daily" and "did not even give us help that he was expected to" shift the complaint from its emotional nature to a behavioural aspect. This is an action that is representative of what the complainant is experiencing and therefore serves to give evidence to his/her grievance. Negation is used effectively here to intensify the grievance by emphasizing non-involvement and complete lack of involvement. The phrase "expected of him" carries a lot of significance pragmatically speaking.

3. Pract of Accusing

Accusing is a significant pragmatic act in divorce proceedings, through which participants attribute blame to their spouses for behaviours considered responsible for the collapse of the marriage. Such statements highlight alleged misconduct and attempt to establish liability before the court, thereby influencing judicial interpretation of the dispute.

Functions of the Pract of Accusing

Blame-Attribution Function

Through accusatory statements, litigants highlight alleged misconduct such as violence, deception, or neglect to establish responsibility for the marital conflict. This pract strengthens legal claims by presenting the accused party as morally or legally culpable for the breakdown of the marriage. Accusations often involve evaluative and emotionally charged expressions that construct the speaker as a victim while undermining the credibility of the opposing party. Within the courtroom context, this pract therefore performs both persuasive and evidential functions aimed at influencing judicial judgement.

Excerpt 7

She's highly disrespectful, cruel and proud. I am speaking from my experience of how she conducted herself in the relationship. There were numerous occasions where she spoke to me in a demeaning and dismissive manner, often in the presence of others, without regard for my feelings or dignity

Excerpt 7 emphasises interpersonal conflicts and assigns blame. It focuses on unfavourable characteristics and accusations and is evaluative in nature. The speaker's discontent or complaint about their spouse's actions or personality is reflected in the emotionally charged and judgmental language used. The speaker commits an act of accusation by calling the spouse "disrespectful", "cruel," and "proud." The clause "I am speaking from my experience of how she conducted herself in the relationship," serves as a credibility marker. On the pragmatic level, it builds epistemic authority by implying that the accusation is not an assumption, but one based on lived experience. Further, the assertion "there were numerous occasions where she spoke to me in a demeaning and dismissive manner" serves as the actual accusation. Words like "demeaning" and "dismissive" are evaluative in nature; they imply that there is something morally wrong about that behaviour in terms of expected respect between partners. Furthermore, "often in the presence of others" is an additional layer that adds weight to the accusation. It implies humiliation on the pragmatic level and thus increases the gravity of the offence committed. Lastly, "without regard for my feelings or dignity" can be seen as a normative appeal that highlights the violation of certain interpersonal cultural norms regarding respect and consideration in the context of a marriage.

Excerpt 8

He sent me away from our matrimonial home after regular beatings and infliction of several life-threatening injuries on me.

By accusing the respondent of violent acts and wrongful expulsion, this statement fulfils its accusatory purpose. To emphasise the gravity of the alleged abuse, the petitioner highlights incidents such as "regular beatings" and "life-threatening injuries." This statement functions as a context-specific practice that creates a victimisation narrative and places blame for the marriage's breakdown, according to Mey's (2001) pragmatic acts theory. The statement aims to use the court's moral and legal judgment to resolve the conflict by drawing attention to harm and injustice.

Excerpt 9

He is highly insecure and has trust issues. He is not fit to be a husband to any reasonable woman. These trust issues affected our communication and made it difficult to maintain a good relationship. Rather than addressing concerns calmly, he approached situations with hostility and suspicion, which led to constant fights

The act of accusation is explained in the passage above. It draws attention to the spouse's character defects, emphasising problems with trust and a high degree of insecurity. The passage undermines the spouse's role as a husband and makes a negative assessment of his suitability for marriage by attributing these flaws to him. The part "Rather than addressing concerns calmly, he approached situations with hostility and suspicion" carries more weight in terms of the accusatory intention. More specifically, this phrase introduces a contrast between two actions performed: one expected and normative (calmly addressing concerns) and another one being actually done. Besides that, the words "hostility" and "suspicion" contribute to moral evaluation and serve as an illustration of the speaker's negative attitude towards the respondent's behaviour. The sentence "which led to constant fights" provides justification for the speaker's grievance, hence constituting the essence of an accusing utterance. To be precise, in such moves, it is particularly important to justify the speaker's grievance since that would provide him with reasons to make accusations. In addition, the adverb "constantly" adds to the negative perception of the situation described in the accusation.

Excerpt 10

He blocked every opportunity of joining the children in United Kingdom by intentionally refusing my invitation letter for the process of my visa

The excerpt above describes the spouse's actions to explain the act of accusing. It portrays the other party as purposefully obstructive and places deliberate blame in this situation. As the speaker presents herself as the one at a disadvantage, the passage constructs victimhood rather than merely describing it. By subtly requesting the court's intervention to rectify the alleged injustice, the statement functions as an appeal for justice. It emphasises conflict escalation, emphasising not only a disagreement but also a purposeful act of obstruction, which further complicates the speaker's accountability for the marriage's breakdown.

Distribution of Pragmemes and Their Communicative Goals in Selected Divorce Court Proceedings

S/N	PRAGMEME	GOAL	FREQ	%
1	How much are you suggesting to the court to be the contribution of the respondent for the education and welfare of the child?	Questioning	2	18. 2
2	How long did your courtship last?	Questioning		
3	I want 200k per month. This will also cover for the child's JSS3 exam fees	Responding	2	18. 2
4	One year, sir	Responding		
5	I left the house because of his constant threat, nagging and abusive nature to my life. Even me, I can't live with a lion	Complaining and justifying	2	18. 1
6	I was deceived into the marriage. He lied about his genotype throughout our courtship	Complaining and justifying		
7	See, when we were together, I felt completely alone. He is physically present at but emotionally absent. He did not participate in the day-to-day care of our child, and didn't even provide any support expected of him.	Complaining	1	9. 1
8	She's highly disrespectful, cruel and proud. I am speaking from my experience of how she conducted herself in the relationship. There were numerous occasions where she spoke to me in a demeaning and dismissive manner, often in the presence of others, without regard for my feelings or dignity	Blame	1	9. 1
9	He sent me away from our matrimonial home after regular beatings and infliction of several life-threatening injuries on me.	Accusing	3	27. 3
10	He is highly insecure and has trust issues. He is not fit to be a husband to any reasonable woman. These trust issues affected our communication and made it difficult to maintain a good	Accusing		

	relationship. Rather than addressing concerns calmly, he approached situations with hostility and suspicion, which led to constant fights			
11	He blocked every opportunity of joining the children in United Kingdom by intentionally refusing my invitation letter for the process of my visa	Accusing		
	TOTAL		11	100

This table presents a distribution of pragmeme used in divorce proceedings, revealing a predominance of conflict-driven communicative acts. The most frequent pragmeme is accusing, which accounts for 27.3% of the data, indicating that participants largely focus on attributing blame and establishing wrongdoing, particularly in statements detailing abuse, neglect, and obstruction of opportunities. This is followed by questioning and responding, each constituting 18.2%, reflecting the institutional nature of courtroom discourse where elicitation of information and direct answers are essential to legal proceedings. Similarly, complaining and justifying also record 18.1%, showing that participants not only express grievances but simultaneously legitimise their actions, especially in narratives of marital breakdown and personal safety. Less frequent are complaining and blaming, each at 9.1%, suggesting that while expressions of dissatisfaction and fault-finding occur, they are often embedded within broader accusatory or justificatory frameworks. Overall, the analysis demonstrates that divorce discourse is heavily characterised by defensive and offensive pragmatic strategies, with a strong emphasis on accusation and justification as participants negotiate moral and legal positioning before the court.

Findings

The pragmatic acts (practices) in Oyo Town's divorce process and their communicative functions in courtroom discourse have been studied in this paper. Participants use a variety of context-specific language strategies to make assertions, defend actions, and assign blame for marital failures, according to an analysis of courtroom data. Three primary pragmatic acts were found in the data: accusing, complaining/justifying, and questioning/responding. Litigants and legal professionals use these practices as strategic communication tools to shape identities, negotiate meaning, and impact judicial interpretation.

Establishing Facts through Questioning and Responding

One of the most noticeable pragmatic patterns in the data is the questioning/responding practice, especially during cross-examinations and judicial clarifications. The main purpose of this practice is to establish facts, which allows the court to obtain data pertinent to rulings. Judges' and attorneys' questions steer the proceedings in particular ways, requiring litigants to give crucial information about their financial responsibilities, marital history, and child welfare.

According to the study, these inquiries are more than just informal ones; they are structured communication efforts meant to obtain information that is pertinent to the law. Examples of the factual background required for a court's decision include questions about how much financial support a spouse is expected to provide for a child's well-being or how long the couple has been dating prior to marriage. The court can evaluate parental responsibilities, monetary contributions, and the type of marriage by using the litigants' responses as evidence. The hierarchical dynamics of courtroom discourse are also demonstrated by the pattern of questioning and responding. While litigants usually give succinct, courteous answers that adhere to courtroom norms, judges and attorneys have the institutional authority to ask questions. This exchange demonstrates how pragmatic acts operate within institutional frameworks, where language serves as both an evidential and procedural tool in the fight for justice.

The questioning and response strategies identified in the study are consistent with the views of Paul Drew (1992), who, in his study on courtroom cross-examination, observed that questioning in the legal context not only involves the process of seeking out facts but also of controlling the narrative and the interpretation by the institution.

These results also indicate that questions and responses in Oyo Town divorce cases are used for the purposes of exercising authority and creating facts.

Complaining and Justifying as Grievance Articulation Strategy

The practice of complaining and justifying, in which litigants recount marital problems and provide an explanation for their divorce request, is the other noteworthy pragmatic action found in the data. Speakers use this technique to express their complaints, explaining their moral, psychological, or emotional suffering while also defending their behaviour. Litigants can describe their struggles and how their marriages failed by filing complaints. Themes of emotional neglect, intimidation, dishonesty, or incompatibility are frequently at the heart of these stories. This

practice's justificatory component allows speakers to defend actions like moving out of the marital residence or filing for divorce by portraying them as appropriate reactions to unbearable situations. The analysis also reveals that this practice usually entails creating a victim narrative in which speakers portray themselves as people who have suffered for a long time in the marriage. Litigants try to convince the court that their actions were only driven by self-preservation or personal welfare by highlighting suffering and injustice. According to Mey's pragmatic theory, these kinds of statements serve as context-dependent practices that are influenced by the socio-legal norms that exist within the courtroom.

Further, the finding regarding complaining and justifying in this research also validates earlier academic views regarding the construction of narratives in legal discourse. According to Jacob Mey, pragmatic acts are social acts embedded within a particular context and shaped by institutional expectations, and this is clearly demonstrated by the way litigants use narratives of victimisation in seeking divorce. Moreover, the habit of justifying oneself using narratives of suffering, neglect, and intimidation is another validation of the views expressed by John Conley and William O'Barr (1998) concerning the strategic use of language in negotiations of credibility and social identity. Thus, the current research contributes further to existing studies by uncovering the role played by complaints and justifications among divorce litigants in Oyo Town in the negotiation of moral legitimacy.

Accusing as a Blame-Attribution Strategy

The third notable pragmatic act identified in the data is the act of accusing, which relies on a primary strategy of attributing blame. By placing responsibility on actions considered morally or legally unacceptable, litigants direct the blame for the marriage's failure toward the other party. Allegations of misconduct frequently appear in the data, including claims of abuse, neglect, disrespect, and deceit. Through these preemptive behaviours, speakers portray the respondents as the source of marital conflict. This tactic bolsters the speaker's legal position while undermining that of their opponent.

Moreover, the establishment of accusation as an attribution strategy is consistent with other scholarly findings on adversarial strategies used in legal processes. For instance, Walton (2008) explains that accusations play an essential role in arguing against claims from other parties while fortifying one's own arguments with more evidence. Similarly, it is worth noting that the study is in line with the observations of Ilie (2018), who suggests that legal discourse is heavily pragmatic

in nature. Accusations of abuse, deception, and neglect made in this study are typical of the strategic construction of blame.

It should be noted that, contrary to other empirical works on the same subject, which mostly focus on criminal cases, this study is particularly concerned with divorce procedures in a Nigerian socio-cultural environment, such as Oyo town.

Conclusion

Using Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Acts Theory, this paper has investigated the pragmatic acts and their communicative roles in divorce cases in Oyo Town. The results show that courtroom discourse during divorce proceedings is highly strategic, with involved parties using contextual communication techniques such as questioning/responding, complaining and justifying, and accusing. There are several theoretical implications in the current study regarding legal pragmatics and discourse analysis. First, this paper shows that courtroom speech acts can be considered socially significant and are determined by the institution of law and interpersonal conflicts, as well as by cultural expectations of participants in the communicative process. Unlike most of the pragmatic studies conducted previously, this research shows how praxis like questioning/responding, complaining/justifying and accusing are used in the emotionally laden environment of marital disputes. Secondly, the study significantly advances the knowledge of African legal discourse studies as it describes how Yoruba sociocultural ideologies about marriage, gender roles, morality, and other concepts affect courtroom discourse and its interpretation by the judge. From a practical perspective, the results of research will contribute to better comprehension of communicative strategies applied during divorce litigation, which can help in analysing litigants' speech acts by legal practitioners and discourse analysts. Future scholars may incorporate multimodal discourse analysis, corpus-based approaches, or gender-focused investigations to explore how non-verbal communication, frequency patterns, and gender ideologies shape pragmatic acts in courtroom discourse.

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