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Sociocultural Implications of Female Discourse Intonation in “Mr&Mrs”

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Abstract

This study examines the discourse intonation features that distinguish the females' voices from males' and their sociocultural implications. Discourse intonation attempts to explain how intonation patterns in English affect the communicative value of speech, through the use of falling and rising tunes along with changes in pitch (Mark Chapman 2007). Previous researches on discourse intonation paid attention to theory, pitch variations and its functions (Brazil 1994, Chun2002, Ibrahim and Faleke 2013, Raúl J.V. (2015). However, none of the many studies has been dedicated to studying the socio-cultural implications of female discourse intonation of Women in Nollywood film titled Mr & Mrs; hence the need for this study. This study will add to available corpus for phonological analysis, it will also throw light on the pattern of female intonation as means of seeking identity and expression in Nigerian society. This will be done by purposively selecting fifteen dialogues involving women in different context from Nollywood film –Mr& Mrs. this is with a view to examining the sociocultural implications of the discourse intonation patterns of women for the Nigerian society.

Keywords: Female, Discourse Intonation, Sociocultural Implications, Nollywood Film

Introduction

Language is a form of social behavior that allows difference in issue relating to gender, tribal, social and occupational status; hence, no two speakers are exactly alike in their way of speaking Pan (2011). Some of the factors that shape the features of female language as well as discourse intonation include physiological, psychological, cultural, educational occupational and technological factors. Others include speaker's status, and conversational context. One of the criteria that differentiate female voice from male voice is pitch. Simpson (2009) observes that male's voice pitch, on the average is always low while that of female is high. Discourse intonation is the study of intonation from the point of view of the user, its contextual functions and its communicative value (Raúl J.V. 2015).

Mr and Mrs is one of Nigerian English-medium film popularly called Nollywood -a coinage given to the Nigerian film industry.

Lakoff R (2009) observes that

Our use of language embodies attitudes as well as referential meanings. 'Woman's language' has as foundation the attitude that women are marginal to the serious concerns of life, which are pre-empted by men. The marginality and powerlessness of women is reflected in both the ways women are expected to speak, and the ways in which women are spoken of. In appropriate women's speech, strong expression of feeling is avoided, expression of uncertainty is favored, and means of expression in regard to subject-matter deemed 'trivial' to the 'real' world are elaborated. Speech about women implies an object, whose sexual nature requires euphemism, and whose social roles are derivative and dependent in relation to men. The personal identity of women thus is linguistically submerged; the language works against treatment of women, as serious persons with individual views. (pg45)

According to Umukoro and Okwuowulu (2010:228) “African society is founded on a chauvinistic ideology which has not provided an enabling environment for the development

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Of discourse intonation of women in Nigerian English-medium home video among other things might be a protest against the submergence of womanhood in the African society. This is one factor that the current study intends to examine. The study of Ladele (2009) centres on reconstructing identities through resistance in postcolonial women's writing. She observes that there is an emergence of new breed of women across the globe. She submits that: Today, there seems to be an identity crisis for women as we perceive a disjuncture between the typical portrayal of women as weak and inconsequential in the scheme of things and the current emergence of a new breed of women from all over the continent.

This presupposes emergence of a class of women across the globe with a different world view which reflect in their language use and approach to life generally. Several means and approaches have been employed to address the issue of gender equity. Literary works, broadcast programme, and awareness campaigns are not left out in bid to make an African woman maximize her potential in the society. The emergence of Nollywood films added impetus to the already on-going activities towards women emancipation and liberation from the aspect of culture and tradition that seem to limit them.

discourse intonation is more than rising and falling of pitch of voice in production of sound, it reveals the mind and attitude of the speaker and allows the semantic intention of the speaker and many of his/her unspoken words to be understood, Roach (1992), Wennerstrom (2001), Chun (2002), Ibrahim and Faleke 2013). Much of the African culture is still intrinsically patriarchal consequent upon which the womenfolk are often relegated to the background. They are at the receiving end of any matrimonial challenges and disorderliness -polygamy, divorce, child problem, in-laws and many more. In the face of all these, Nigeria has been witnessing the emergence of English-medium home -video production over the last three decades known as Nollywood films.

Literature Review

Discourse intonation attempts to explain how intonation patterns in English affect the communicative value of speech, through the use of falling and rising tunes along with changes in pitch. It is used to analyse how intended but implied meaning is communicated. In communication, part of the speaker's intended meaning and volumes are not clearly expressed but embedded in how he says what he says in a way that provokes listener to infer the real unspoken meaning. Discourse intonation communicates the semantic intention of the speaker. It explains how a speaker is able to make his intention known to the listener (Brazil 1994). It is a system that provides a speaker with opportunity to make choices from available options.

Discourse intonation has been acknowledged as an indispensable aspect of language and communication (Chun1998). Proper intonation provides a high percentage of speech intelligibility. To a very large extent, intonation is responsible for success in communication. Without discourse intonation, there will be communication breakdown and the range meanings a listener will draw from the speaker's utterance will be grossly inadequate.

Discourse intonation postulates that speakers select various intonation choices which reflect their understandings of the degree of shared assumptions between them and their hearer partners (Brazil 1994).

Chun (1998:85), submits that "sentence stress does not occur in a relatively fixed position towards the end of the utterance in English"; based on the surrounding context, the speaker makes decisions about what word to stress and what attitude or intention to express. Raúl (2015), opines that discourse intonation advocated the study of intonation from the point of view of the user, its function in context and its communicative value. A comprehensive approach to English discourse intonation is a well-defined set of prosodic features that the speaker can choose. The prosodic features go beyond rising and falling of tunes. They also include rhythm, vowel lengthening, emotionality, assertiveness and hesitation.

The explicit aim of Chun (2002) is to move "from intonational theory to intonation practice", by proposing a model of discourse intonation that shifts the focus from intonation form to intonation functions. Drawing inference from the descriptions of earlier authors, especially Brazil, Chun systematically moves the focus from the traditional intonation functions -grammatical, accentual and attitudinal functions to discourse intonation function which allows for the use sociolinguistic approach. This allows for "a range of functions beyond the sentence level for the purpose of achieving continuity and coherence within a discourse" (Chun, 2002:42). The concern of Schultz M. F. (2012), is the lessons of cultural diversity in Nollywood films. He observes further that Nollywood reflects and preserves indigenous culture, rather than simply contributing to a global monoculture that some fear is developing.

The main concern of Adewoye et al (2014) is portrayal of woman in Nollywood films. The study was designed to analyse the forms and pattern of portrayal of women and gender role stereotypes in selected Nollywood movies. They find out that women were portrayed in the movies as sex objects and domestic servants; working class women as insubordinate wives and uncaring mothers. This conclusion is an overgeneralization. It is not possible to condemn the role of Nollywood films in feminism struggle just because a few ones portrayed the women in bad light. There are many more Nollywood films that are deliberately designed to fight the course of the females in a male-favoured and male-dominated society like Nigeria.

This study on socio-cultural implication of discourse intonation of women in the selected English-medium Nigerian home videos titled *Mr. & Mrs.* aims at describing factors responsible for variation between the male and the female discourse intonations and assessing the discourse intonation of the female in *Mr & Mrs* as an instrument of protest against primitive tradition and male dominance. In order to achieve these, the study draws its data from *Mr & Mrs*. The dialogues were chosen because they involve women at different communicative contexts. The extracted dialogues were transcribed and subjected to instrumental analysis using SFS/WASP. Theoretical insights were drawn from the discourse intonation theory of Brazil, (1994) and Maltz and Borcker, (1998).

Synopsis of *M & Mrs*

Mr. and Mrs. is a film that depicts how African women suffer dominance, low recognition, slavery and lot more from their male counterparts. Susan -the heroine, gives Ken (her husband) everything she has, she practically worships him, the gesture Ken takes for granted being overwhelmed by masculine ego and pride of his social status. Susan has two battles to fight -ego that is found in every man and

social strata. She confesses that she has lost Ken to pride and social strata.

Ken maltreats Susan until she could take it no longer. When she was pushed to the wall, she fought back with her words, voice, intonation and rhythm of her speech. Ken was surprised to see her gentle and obedient wife talking back at him; he exclaimed “You now talk back at me” (Scene 9). At the end Ken realizes his wrong, apologizes and promises to make it up to her in all areas he has taken her love and submission for granted.

Findings

The intonation of both the males and the females in the study did not conform to the native speakers’ rather the

second language users such as Nigerian English. The study agrees with Pan (2011) and Orazbekova et al (2015) that the factors that shape the features of female language are not only the influences of physiology and psychology, but also socio-cultural factors. The females deployed various intonation patterns as a result of different discourse situations. Different intonation was expressed at different times depending on the conversation context. Susan for instance deployed falling intonation, soft and low voice while communicating with her friends Linda and Mrs Brown. She deployed high and harsh voice, vowel lengthening, unusual amplitude, prominence and emotional expressiveness while protesting against Ken’s submergence.

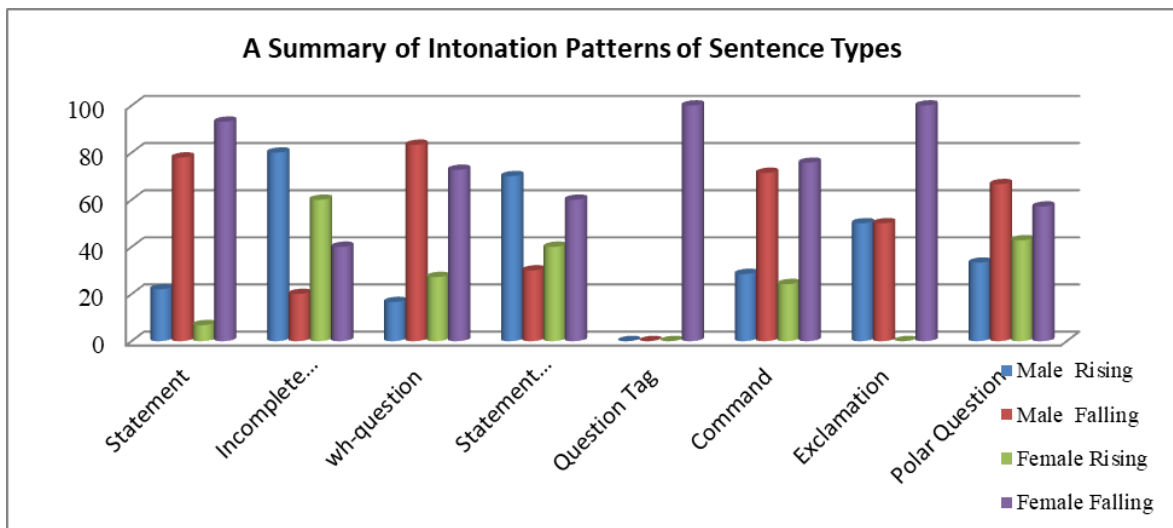


Fig. 1

Fig 1 presents the summary of intonation deployments by the males and the females in the study. There is a significant difference in the deployments of rising and

falling tunes of the males and the females across some sentence usages. These include incomplete statement, statement question, exclamation and question tag.

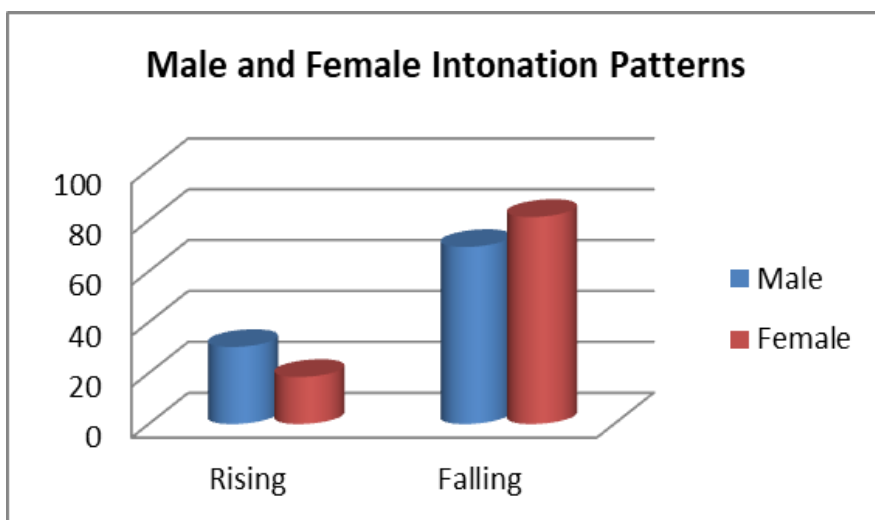


Fig. 2

The females deployed more falling intonation patterns than their male counterparts. This is because there are emerged females who speak without fear or anxiety.

The results of the study revealed that there were three different statuses of the females in the film that affected their discourse intonation choices. They are grouped as follows:

- a. The submerged women – Kate represented this group of females. She was awaiting admission into the university but had to work as a domestic servant to Linda. Charles, Linda’s husband exploited her sexually. She had neither voice nor what it takes to lead a life of her own. She was perpetually at the mercy of her male and females bosses. The intonation

is mainly falling tune, soft and low voice. Prominence, vowel lengthening and assertiveness were not deployed.

- b. The emerging women -Susan represented this group of women. She gave up her right to live to her husband who took it for granted. She decided to resist and break the bondage of 'servant-wife'. In order to breakthrough from submergence, she began to deploy discourse intonation features to resist Ken's dominance. This gave her the status of an emerging woman. The emerging female deployed both falling and rising intonation patterns. As the name implies, the emerging females deployed discourse intonation features to launch a mild protest. Unusual amplitude, vowel lengthening, rhythm, prominence and assertiveness characterized their deployment of intonation.

- c. The emerged -Mrs Brown represented this group of women. She was an example of a female captain of industry. She was a lawyer, marriage counselor, psychologist at the same time a responsible wife. she spoke with calmness, without fear of being dominated. This group of females deployed intonation with confidence and authority. They did not deploy much prominence and high tune but they speak with assertiveness.

The result corroborates the findings of scholars like Henton (1989), Haan and van Heuven (1999) and Ró isín Parkins (2012) on emotional expressiveness of female intonation. The female intonation emotional expressiveness accounts for its swoopy nature than their male counterparts.

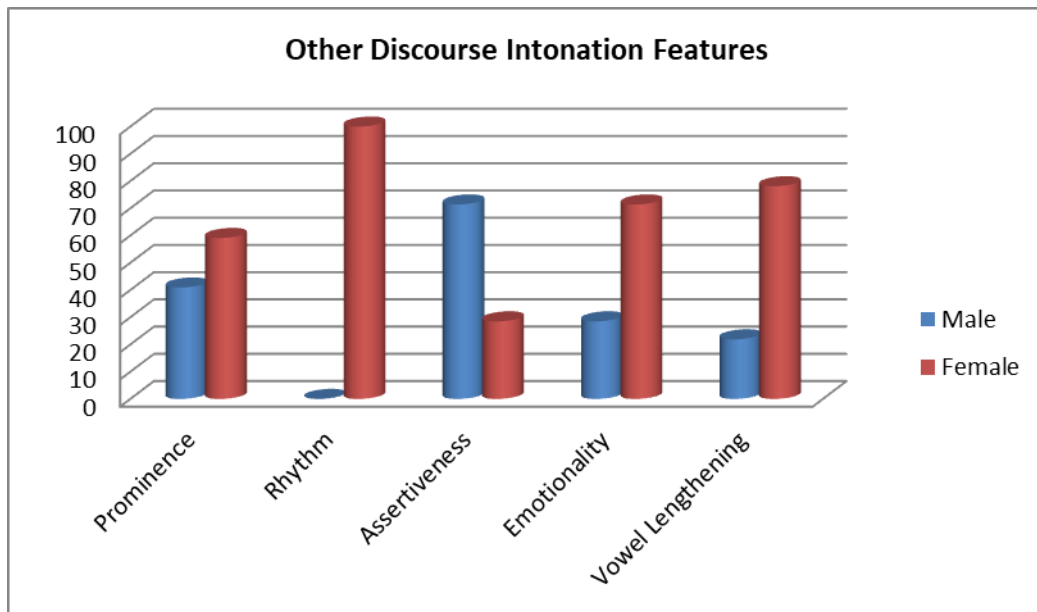


Fig.3

Apart from the deployments of rising and falling intonations, the female speakers of English in *Mr & Mrs* Nollywood films deployed other discourse intonation features. Fig.3 above shows that there are significant differences in the males and females' deployments of

rhythm, prominence, vowel lengthening, emotionality and assertiveness. The males had highest deployments of assertiveness while the females had highest deployment in rhythm, prominence, vowel lengthening and emotionality.

Acoustic analysis of the female vowel lengthening

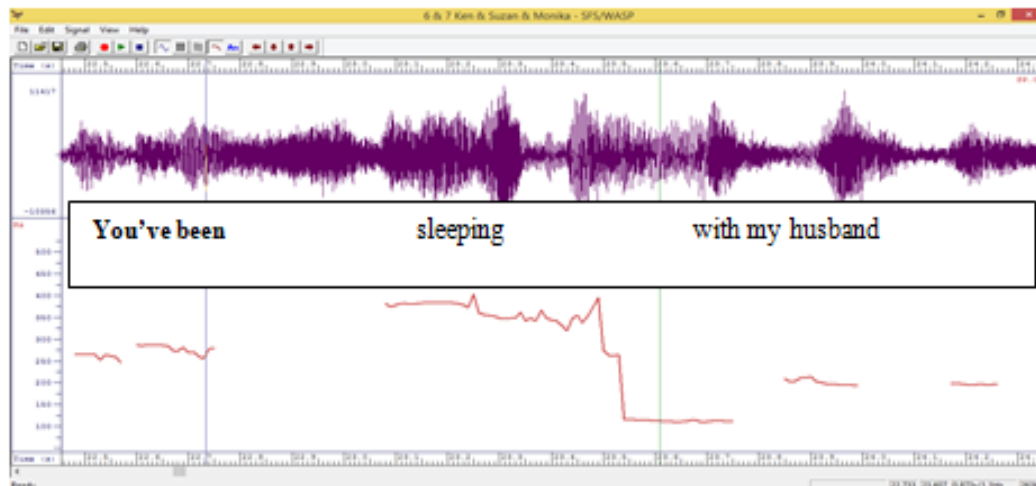


Fig.4

Susan: You've been sleeping with my husband.

Common to the female intonation as observed in the acoustic analysis of the pilot study were vowel lengthening, prominence and hesitation. The token above was made in

1.648sc, sleeping with lengthening of /i:/ was made in 0.873sc leaving all other words in the token with 0.775sc.

Acoustic analysis of the female silent hesitation and amplitude

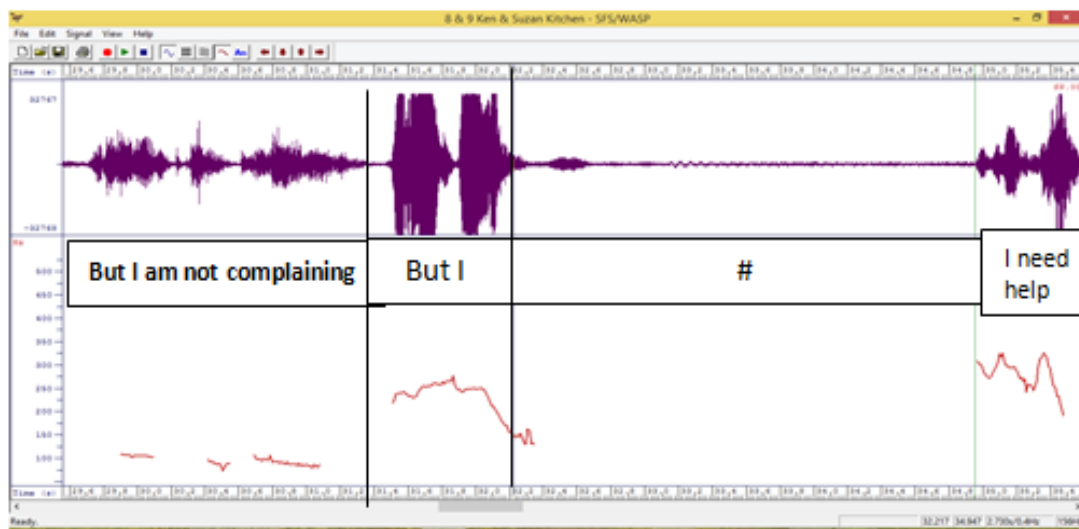


Fig. 5

Ken: But I am not complaining
 Susan: But I am ... I need help

Fig.5 above presented the acoustic analysis of the males and the female’s vowel lengthening as well as female’s hesitation and amplitude. Both the wave form and the pitch tract showed that there was a period of silence between ‘But I am’ and ‘I need help’. Susan deployed silent hesitation to enable her think and signal the importance of what she would say next. The wave form also showed that there was unusual loudness in ‘But I am’.

The results show that part of the females’ discourse intonation is emotionality and excessive loudness of voice. The socio-cultural implication is that the females deployed these discourse intonation features as a means of revolting against the abuse of their persons. The females also deployed discourse intonation features to protest against opposition, to expressing pain and frustration.

Loudness, assertiveness, high and low pitches which usually characterised male intonation now features prominently in female discourse intonation. This is partly because of their social position and it is deployed as a form of protest against male dominance.

Different intonation is expressed at different times depending on the prevailing circumstance. The study agrees with Pan (2011), and Orazbekova et al (2015) that the factors that shape the features of female language are not only the influences of physiology and psychology, but also socio-cultural that female uses various intonation patterns which is as a result of different discourse situations. Women categories to be explained here

The result corroborates the findings of scholars like Henton (1989), Haan and van Heuven (1999) and Ró isín Parkins (2012) on emotional expressiveness of female intonation. The female intonation emotional expressiveness accounts for its swoopy nature than their male counterparts.

Common to female intonation as observes in the result of the study is vowel lengthening, this agrees with Simpson (2009). Whereas it takes Ken (a male character) to produce “But I am not complaining” in 1.9 seconds, Susan (a female character spent 1.3 second on :But I am”

Worthy of note among the socio-cultural implications as depicts in the selected Nollywood film –Mr. & Mrs. is the fact that, in the world of work women are now rising to the peak of their career, many of them are superior to many men in their offices. Hence, the way Susan could not talk to Ken, a female Psychologist and a marriage counselor spoke to him and he quickly apologize to her.

Ken: I don’t even know what you stand for

Mrs Brown: I take an exception to that; what I do for you is a favour what I should get is gratitude and not an attitude.

Ken: I am sorry...

Traditionally, men’s intonation is characterized by assertiveness, high and low, which depicts authority and finality, the result however shows that women’s intonation patterns today are suggestive of male’s cultural qualities. For instance, loudness assertiveness, high and low pitches now characterize the features of discourse intonation patterns of women as epitomized in *Mr & Mrs*.

What women want men to see are succinctly put together in the words of Barbara (2015:1) as follows?

I came to realize more what yelling really is, and what do women want to convey when yelling. It’s more of it’s-too-much line, Im-in pain-but you-dont-care, I-am-yelling-because-I-want-you-to-see-my-pain, or it could be oh-gosh-please-do-something-about-it-I-don’t-want-to-leave.

Sentences could go on and on as we try to decipher why do women yell. One thing is clear though, women only yell to men they care about. (I’m talking about romantic argument not a threatening hold up scenario where we have to yell.

Shouting back at men (husband) is a sign that wife has been pushed to the wall and as a result cannot longer take it.

Lakoff R (2009:45) observes that

Our use of language embodies attitudes as well as referential meanings. ‘Woman’s language’ has as foundation the attitude that women are marginal to the serious concerns of life, which are pre-empted by men. The marginality and powerlessness of women is reflected in both the ways women are expected to speak, and the ways

in which women are spoken of. In appropriate women's speech, strong expression of feeling is avoided, expression of uncertainty is favored, and means of expression in regard to subject-matter deemed 'trivial' to the 'real' world are elaborated.

Conclusion

The research is interested in looking at the socio-cultural implication of female discourse intonation in *Mr. & Mrs.* The study concludes that the Nigerian society is a male-favoured and male-dominated society. The females were traditionally submerged. Their statues vis-a-vis submergence determined their discourse intonation choices. The socio-cultural implication is that many females were transiting from one status to another. The emerging females for instance were deploying discourse intonational choices to protest against primitive culture that seem to be limiting them.

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