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Relevance of Rapport Management in Marital Conflicts: Issues from Covid-19 Pandemic Lockdown

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Abstract

The total lockdown in Nigeria during the second quarter of year 2020, which emanated as a strategy to control the pandemic caused by the Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) generated diverse cases of marital conflicts that necessitate close examination. In this connection, the aim of this research is to investigate the rapport strategies involved in the marital conflicts depicted in a widely shared video skit on some WhatsApp platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in Nigeria, with the objective to project rapport orientations and relational skills for managing marital relationships. The linguistic approach adopted for this research is Spencer-Oatey's (2008 and 2011) [13, 14] Rapport Management, which pertains to the sub-field of Pragmatics. Rapport management perspective is viable for analyzing marital conflicts, particularly being that language is pivotal in both the construction and destruction of social relationships. Rapport management basically includes politeness/impoliteness dimensions, face sensitivities, sociality rights and obligations, as well as interactional goals. The methodology for this research is qualitative and its paradigm is interpretive. The research findings reveal that all levels of language and domains such as speech acts, topic choice, topic organization, turn-taking rights, choice of tone, use of address terms and honorifics, gestures, eye contact, proxemics and other body movements need to be properly managed because they could affect rapport between interlocutors either positively or negatively, such that marital relationships could either be enhanced, maintained or threatened.

Introduction

The Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) which started in December 2019 in Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei Province, China, unfortunately spread across other parts of the world and became a global catastrophe. In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic. The unprecedented outbreak and the quick spread of the contagious COVID-19 consequently led to restrictions of movements, which culminated into global lockdown, alongside its concomitant challenges. One of the prevalent challenges that characterized the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown across nations was marital conflicts / violence, inclusive of Nigeria. Multiple reports, particularly on the social media, portrayed dramatic increase in marital conflicts during the lockdown.

This research investigates the rapport strategies involved in the marital conflicts depicted in a widely shared video skit on some WhatsApp platforms during the COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria, with the objective to project rapport orientations and relational skills for managing marital relationships. The linguistic approach adopted for this research is Spencer-Oatey's (2008 and 2011) [13, 14] Rapport Management, which pertains to the sub-field of Pragmatics. Rapport management perspective is viable for analyzing marital conflicts, particularly being that language is pivotal in both the construction and destruction of social relationships. Rapport management basically includes politeness/impoliteness dimensions, face sensitivities, sociality rights and obligations, as well as interactional goals.

Expectedly, studies that have focused on rapport management strategies in discourse have been on the increase, particularly highlighting the relevance of rapport management strategies in managing discourse and interpersonal relations involved in diverse interactions. Various studies have examined the way rapport was managed in business settings. One of such studies was conducted by Planken (2005) [11], whereby he arranged and analyzed simulated sales negotiations and observed that professional negotiators used 'safe talk' and the pronouns 'we' and 'you' frequently and effectively in managing others'

sociality rights - association rights and equity rights.

Interestingly, there have been some studies that investigated the situation in which there is an imminent need for an individual to manage rapport with his/her interlocutor, as in the case of having damaged it and risking in turn damaging the reputation of the individual or the organization the individual represents. One of such studies was carried out by Ho (2017) [4] in which he examined how hotel management amends its relationship with the reviewers after offending them openly with an obligatory move of the review response genre, Deny Problem, on TripAdvisor. TripAdvisor is a popular travel-related website where information about the quality of accommodation services provided by hotels in different cities across the globe can now be conveniently obtained by accessing travellers' reviews posted on the website. These reviews, especially negative ones, can have a serious impact on the hotels concerned, whose reputation and business are at stake. Hotel management thus needs to address negative comments with an effective response, which Ho (2017: 1) [4] termed "review response genre", to achieve service recovery. Drawing upon the construct of rapport as the analytical framework, Ho (2017) [4] focused particularly on the ways the review response genre serves the communicative purpose while responding to unjust negative comments. It was observed that hotel management deals with such comments with denials of the problems mentioned in the comments and attempts to enhance rapport with the dissatisfied customers. The findings should be of practical significance to hotels and the practitioners responsible for writing review responses.

Moreover, rapport management strategies have been applied to literary works. Unuabonah (2020) [17] discussed rapport management strategies in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and examined the linguistic strategies utilized by characters in resolving conflicts and managing rapport and interpersonal relations in the novel. She highlighted that the text, *Purple Hibiscus*, reflects the kinds of extremist ideologies that exist in Nigeria, and it contains conflictual conversations which require that the rapport between characters needs to be managed.

Basically, conflict is perceived as differences in opinion or issue position between two or more parties, at the same time (Opara, 2014) [10]. Concerning marital conflict, Nwokeji and Ebirim (2021) [9] describe it as "a disagreement over an issue among couples which is capable of creating emotional, psychological, or physical problems in families, if not addressed promptly". Obviously, marital conflict bears negatively on every aspect of the affected families. Ekennia (2019) [3] noted that such homes are characterized by unhappiness and disharmony, which generate devastating stress. Apparently, marital conflict is a social problem that could be disruptive if not resolved through appropriate relationship skills. Thus, skills that could manage and resolve marital conflicts should be projected, which establishes the viability of this present research.

Nevertheless, many works have been carried out on rapport management of conflicts of diverse dimensions, as well as on strategies for conflict resolutions. However, this research highlights rapport orientations that project skills geared towards enhancement and maintenance of marital relationships, such that conflicts are averted. In this connection, the following research questions are triggered: What are the causes of marital conflicts in the video skit being examined? What are the lessons for marital

relationships from the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown? What rapport orientation skills enhance and maintain marital relationships?

Essentially, this research examines the rapport management strategies utilized in the marital conflicts portrayed in the video skit under investigation and highlights the rapport orientations and relational skills for managing marital relationships. The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown on marital relationships, as well as the relevance of the enhancement and maintenance rapport orientations on marital relationships would be projected.

Theoretical Framework
As mentioned earlier, the theoretical framework adopted for this research is Spencer-Oatey's (2008 and 2011) [13, 14] Rapport Management, which pertains to the sub-field of Pragmatics. She notes that 'rapport' refers to the relative harmony, connection, and smoothness of relations between people. To the extent that "Language is used to construct, maintain and / or threaten social relationships" (Spencer-Oatey, 2008:12) [13], she emphasizes the need for rapport management. Rapport management, as introduced by Spencer-Oatey (2005) [12], refers to the management (or mismanagement) of relations between people. In other words, rapport management deals with the (mis)management of harmony and disharmony in interpersonal relationships. It is also concerned with "the management of sociality rights and interactional goals". In this connection, the horizon of rapport management is inclusive of both the politeness / impoliteness dichotomy, as well as face sensitivities, sociality rights and obligations, together with interactional goals.

Spencer-Oatey (2008) [13] points out that face sensitivities encompass the concept of face which involves the positive social value that a person claims for him/herself and expects that such a claim is respected by others. The constituents of such values may be personality traits, physical features, beliefs, language affiliations and they differ from person to person, and context to context. Interestingly, the concept of face is closely related to identity, which may be self-identity which has to do with the identity of an individual, group identity or relational identity which occurs in relationships between self and others. On the component of sociality rights and obligations, Spencer-Oatey (2008: 14) [13] states that "sociality rights and obligations deal with social expectancies and reflect peoples' concerns over fairness, consideration, and behavioural appropriateness". Moreover, Spencer-Oatey (2008: 14) [13] focused on interactional goals and points out that such goals are concerned with the "specific tasks and / or relational goals that people may have when they interact with each other".

Consequently, going by the components of rapport management presented above, Spencer-Oatey (2008) [13] notes that the implication of such distinctions is that they delineate three main ways in which rapport can be threatened, which include face-threatening behaviour, rights-threatening / obligation-omission behaviour and goal-threatening behaviour. A face-threatening behaviour is an act which makes the addressee lose "face" or credibility such as criticisms, sarcasms, or oppositions. On the other hand, rights-threatening behaviour is an act that infringes on a person's sense of social entitlements which could infuriate him / her. An instance could be when one's voter's card is not yet released for collection before the awaited election.

On its part, goal-threatening behaviour is an act performed by some other person which hinders the actions that another participant wants to achieve. An example is when participants in an economic empowerment programme are barred by unscrupulous officials from accessing the materials or equipment allocated to them as incentives for their business startups.

Moreover, Spencer-Oatey (2008) [13] points out that there are four types of rapport orientation which may influence interactants' use of rapport management strategies. The rapport orientation types include rapport enhancement, rapport maintenance, rapport neglect and rapport challenge. Spencer-Oatey (2008: 32) [13] asserts that rapport enhancement orientation is "a desire to strengthen or boost harmonious relations between interactants", while rapport maintenance orientation is "a desire to maintain or protect harmonious relations between interlocutors". In addition, she states that rapport neglect orientation depicts "a lack of interests in the quality of relations between interactants", while rapport challenge orientation indicates "a desire to challenge or impair harmonious relations between the interlocutors".

Spencer-Oatey (2008) [13] also notes that contextual variables such as the participants, setting, time; pragmatic principles such as conversational principles; and conventions may determine people's use of rapport management strategies.

In furtherance of the theory of rapport management, Spencer-Oatey (2011) [14] points out that rapport management is very much concerned with the interlocutors' assessments of the affective quality they experience in their relations with others. Moreover, she posits that all levels of language and domains need to be properly managed as they could affect rapport between interlocutors. She presents the domains as follows:

- Illocutionary domain which focuses on the management of speech acts that could create, maintain, or threaten harmony.
- Discourse domain which deals with management of topic choice and topic organization.
- Participation domain which attends to turn-taking rights, inclusion / exclusion of people that are present, as well as use / non-use of listener responses.
- Stylistic domain which addresses the management of choice of tone, genre-appropriate lexis and syntax and use of address terms and honorifics.
- Nonverbal domain which focuses on the management of gestures, eye contact, proxemics, and other body movements.

Essentially, rapport management strategies are vital in establishing effective interpersonal communication and convivial relationships between interactants.

Material and Method
The method of this research is qualitative, with an interpretive paradigm, because it interprets and decodes the various aspects of rapport management strategies contained in the conflictual exchanges in the video skit collected as the data for the study. The video skit was widely shared on some WhatsApp platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in Nigeria.

In the interpretive paradigm, the researcher opts for content analysis for identifying the conflictual exchanges reflected in the interactions between the couple, as shown in the video skit. In the content analysis, the data are examined and interpreted to elicit meaning, obtain comprehension, and eliminate complexities from the expressions, to enhance uncomplicated interpretation of the exchanges between the couple, as portrayed in the video skit (Bowen, 2009) [1].

In this connection, content analysis was conducted in which the data were interpreted with relevance to the objective of the study. The conflictual exchanges were examined in the light of Spencer-Oatey's (2008 and 2011) [13, 14] Rapport Management, whereby the interactional domains, as well as the types of rapport orientation, were detected. However, strategies for resolving marital conflicts, through rapport management, were also provided in the discussion.

Marital Conflicts in the Video Skit
In the video skit, which constitutes the data for this study, conflicts are created through the mismanagement of the illocutionary and non-verbal domains in which the couple perform face-threatening, rights-threatening, and goal-threatening behaviours. The conflicts arose through the husband's incessant demands for sex during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Consequently, the wife's refusal of her husband's excessive demand for sex aggravated violent reactions from her husband to the extent that the couple exposed themselves in the neighbourhood by quarrelling and fighting openly on the streets in the neighbourhood. The wife's reactions are acts of resistance to her husband's sexual excessiveness which resulted in his being harassing and violent, as shown below in Extract One, translated from the Video Skit.

Extract One
Husband: Let's go inside (into the house)!
       See how everyone is watching us!

Wife: Go to where?
    Okay, with all that I've done all through the night, do you want to kill me?
    Yeh! Yeh! Yeh!
    My body is on fire!
    I will not follow you!
    Do you want to kill me?

Description:
Husband's Attitude: Violent
Wife's Attitude: Combative, both verbally and non-verbally.

The husband's sexual excessiveness creates a disharmonious situation between the couple because the wife refused to be abused and reduced to a sexual machine. Unfortunately, the husband lacks the emotional skills of romantic appeal which puts into consideration the feelings of the wife. Consequently, the wife adopts face-threatening behaviour by refusing the husband's orders to get her back into their house, as well as openly shouting out that all he wanted was incessant demand for sex.

Extract Two
Wife: What is it?
    I will not follow you!
    All you do is sex, sex, sex!
    se…se…se…!   (Yoruba)
    [do…do…do…(sex)!]   (English Translation).

The wife's reactions are also portrayed through her non-verbal demonstrations that are suggestive of sexual abuse. Obviously, her husband's approach creates a disharmonious harsh situation which indicates that the stylistic domain is mismanaged such that led to marital conflict. Moreover, the wife's utterances such as shouting:

se…se…se…!	(Yoruba)
[do…do…do…(sex)!]	(English Translation)

Incidentally, mismanaged the illocutionary domain because they are illocutionary forces of complaints which create a disharmonious situation. Nevertheless, the husband's harsh approach indicates that he has a rapport challenge orientation as his harassing moves undermines or challenges the harmonious relations between him and his wife. Ultimately, the husband's interactional goals are not achieved, which increasingly threatens his face. The husband's interactional goal is to get his wife to get back into their house and yield to his sexual demands, but the wife strongly refused to succumb to his violent approach, as portrayed in Extract Three below.

Extract Three
Husband: Tosin, go inside!

Wife: Do what?
    Yeh! I will not follow you!
    Do you want to kill me?
    I'm not doing again!
    I say, I'm not doing again!

Consequently, the husband's sociality right as expected in marital relations has also been violated due to his lack of romantic appeal to get positive response from his wife. Unfortunately, his harsh approach created rights-threatening behaviour that engendered conflictual marital relations between him and his wife.

Coincidentally, the non-verbal domain is mismanaged and projects the theme of resistance which is reflected in the wife's demonstrations that increased the face-threatening behaviour with its resultant disharmony which creates marital conflicts. Due to the husband's harsh approach to obtaining sex, both the non-verbal and illocutionary domains were mismanaged such that his face sensitivities, sociality rights and interactional goals were threatened by his wife's resistance to his lack of romantic appeal, which is a disharmonious behaviour that creates conflictual marital relations.

Causes of Marital Conflicts in the Video Skit
There are multiple factors that triggered the marital conflicts between the couple as shown in the video skit being examined. Some of the causes of the marital conflicts are as follows:
- Communication gap
- Lack of intimacy
- Impoliteness
- Lack of face sensitivities
- Physical abuse

The causes of marital conflicts listed above reveal that the couple did not have a good rapport with each other prior to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Probably, the couple merely lived under the same roof without any romantic spousal connection. Otherwise, the COVID-19 lockdown would have just been a fascinating period of intimate bonding between the couple, such that their sexual relationship would not be conflictual.

Marital Conflicts, Rapport Management and Covid-19 Lockdown Lessons
The causes of marital conflicts presented above invariably portray that there are several lessons to derive from the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. One of the major lessons is to eschew all disharmonious factors that cause marital conflicts, such as the above listed causes of marital conflicts. Another pertinent lesson is to embrace the two positive orientations of rapport management strategies, which are rapport enhancement orientation and rapport maintenance orientation.

Rapport enhancement orientation encompasses skills required to activate marital bliss, such that couples could enjoy their marital union, without disruptive conflicts. Some of the rapport enhancement skills include:
- Skills of effective communication, both verbally and non-verbally.
- Skills of respect for each other's opinions.
- Skills of appreciation and praise of each other.
- Skills of romantic expressions, endearments, and intimacy.
- Skills of mutual love and understanding.
- Skills of prayerfulness.

On the other hand, rapport maintenance orientation is concerned with skills required to manage and resolve marital conflicts. Some of the rapport maintenance skills include:
- Skills of openness with each other.
- Skills of constructive strategies in conflict resolution.
- Skills of forgiveness of each other.
- Skills of planning and engaging in activities together.
- Skills of spending quality time together and sharing experiences.
- Skills of creating memorable moments with each other.

Conclusion
The COVID-19 pandemic lockdown obviously struck the relevance of rapport management strategies in marital relationships. Invariably, rapport management strategies, ranging from all levels of language and domains, together with the appropriate rapport orientations should be effectively adopted in managing marital conflicts. Moreover, marital adjustment is strongly recommended, whereby couples could love each other unconditionally, to enjoy marital bliss. To this extent, further studies on rapport management should be explored.

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