

# Language Use and Domestic Violence in the North West Region of Cameroon: The Case of Bamenda

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## **Abstract**

This study is an investigation of the problem of language use and domestic violence within the Bamenda community. It is focused specifically on English-speaking households. It aims at analyzing the use of language and other linguistic parameters in the expressions and manifestations of domestic violence. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected through interviews, questionnaires, and focus group discussions. They were then analyzed and interpreted using statistical elements and the critical discourse analysis theory. It was found that language is a great/ primordial vehicle that contributes immensely to the transmission of domestic violence within the Bamenda community.

**Keywords:** *Domestic violence, Language use, Discourse, Culture.*

## **Introduction**

Cameroon is bilingual with English and French as the official languages. However, the English language is the dominant language in the North West Region. Thus, the languages used in the Bamenda community are predominantly English language and Pidgin English. Domestic violence is an issue of great concern within this community. One major means through which gender ideology suppresses women and some men in this community is perpetrated through language. This issue of domestic violence is addressed in many institutions such as the court, social welfare, customary law, and civil society organizations but most often victims of domestic violence fear the language of “outsiders” or people who are not family members. This is because they are scared of the societal discourse that will arise if they complain about their present situation. Also, the choice of words these people use makes them to feel reluctant complaint about their situation. They prefer staying with the trauma or living in the situation to save the face of their family and self-dignity.

Language helps us to understand the way societies operate, given the fact that it is a “social practice and not a phenomenon external to society...” (Fairclough, 1992, p.63). According to Mesthrie (2000, p.6) language has a relationship with society in the sense that it signifies "one's social class, status, region of origin, gender and age group". Also,

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(Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000, p.205) add that language is both "constructed and constructive", thereby pointing to the way language draws from existing meanings in a given society, and shapes the subsequent construction of such meanings. In summary concerning the above views on language, Fairclough (1992, p.63) states that language is part of "social practice rather than a purely individual activity". Language is made of patterns of wordings which in turn are realized in social activity (Martin and Rose, 2003, p.3).

With the development of society, language and gender study in a certain context deserves to be conducted. Domestic violence is one such context. For (Butler, 1990, p. 32), performances of gender are always subject to regulation and constraints, meaning they are produced within what he terms a "highly rigid regulatory frame" which "operates as a condition of cultural intelligibility. This implies that some enactments of gender are rendered appropriate and intelligible as a result of the "frame" while others, those that depart from cultural norms are rendered unintelligible and run the risk of sanctions and penalties (Lola, 2014).

### **Background to the Study**

Gender-based violence affects every society in the world and represents an important impediment to development. Anyone can be a victim of violence no matter their gender identity, but it is predominantly women and girls whose lives are greatly impacted by its effects (Carpenter, 2008).

The issue of women interacting differently from men has been discussed for hundreds of years. Linguists became interested in observable differences in language production depending on the gender of the speakers. Hence, feminist movements in the 1960s realized that language was one of the instruments of female oppression by males. Language not only reflected a patriarchal system but also emphasized male supremacy over women. Most of the works analyzing language dealt mostly with male language productions. (Labov 1972a, 1972b), for instance, described mostly the speech of men.

According to data available in the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Cameroon report, between 2006 and October 2008, 3,680 cases of physical violence against women (including domestic violence) and 2,500 cases of psychological violence were recorded by the government's services (UN 2008, p.10). The report does not indicate how many of those cases resulted in prosecution or conviction. The report, however, acknowledges that "some forms of violence concern the victim's intimate life and are therefore not always reported, which makes it difficult to compile statistical information" (Ibid.). A report produced by Human Rights Watch and other NGOs also states that according to interviews conducted with national NGOs, including the ALVF (Association de Lutte Contre les acts of Violence faites aux Femmes), several cases of violence against women "usually goes underreported" (Human Rights Watch 2010, p. 44).

The traditionalist and progressive perceive the socio-cultural construct of violence as a conflict between the Afro-centric value system and Eurocentric stereotypes: ritual initiation versus human right violation, culture versus torture, and beneficial belief systems versus barbaric culture. In abusive relationships, there may be a cycle of abuse during which an act of violence is committed resulting in words thrown at each other like; prostitute, thief, bitch, slave, etc. The outcome is usually beating, punching, isolation, power, and control practices.

This work is focused on gender dimensions in the Bamenda community in the Northwest Region of Cameroon, some of the practices and processes associated with domestic violence as a form of violence against men and women. The importance of linguistic negotiations in societal settings will be illustrated in the investigation of the discourses surrounding the issue of gender resulting in violence and the various kinds of linguistic facts designed to trigger gender ideologies. Lexical items and other linguistic facts used by individuals to create for society a particular conceptualization of violent events and personalities are examined.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The general objectives are to understand the phenomenon of men/women's experiences of domestic violence, including the perception, the reaction of men/women to domestic violence, and factors related to violence among men/women in the Bamenda Community. Specifically, we do a description of the forms of domestic violence against men/women in the Bamenda community. It linguistically describes the perception and responses of men/women who experience domestic violence in their homes and society, factors related to domestic violence against men/women in society, and those reasons that make men/women silent when experiencing violence.

### **Problem Statement**

The Northwest (Bamenda) woman is viewed as law-abiding, hardworking, self-sufficient, and enjoying happy family relationships. Yet she still faces violence worst of it domestic violence. Not only is the woman viewed as being hardworking same thing goes with the men. Although women do abuse their intimate partners, women's violence is often reactionary, shaped by gender roles, and manifests itself differently from that of men. Domestic violence is experienced by men or boys in an intimate relationship such as marriage, cohabitation, dating, or within the family. Violence against men may constitute a crime, but laws vary between jurisdictions. Socio-cultural norms regarding the treatment of men by women, and women by men differ depending on the geographic region, and physically abusive behavior by one partner towards another is regarded varyingly as a serious crime to a more personal matter. Views/observations have proven that men are battered as often as women's use of violence is preceded by severe acts of violence by their partners. However, they find it difficult and embarrassing to ask for social services or police assistance and are unlikely to seek the help of the public. It has been argued that men who experience such violence often encounter pressure against reporting, with those that do facing social stigma regarding their perceived lack of self-confidence and other denigrations of their masculinity. To deal with the abuse as revealing the abuse will destroy the myth and the victim's image. This silence of the Northwest (Bamenda) man/woman is due to social pressure against such reporting, ideologies (culture), resulting from the language used, and the linguistic components resulting in repeated abuse.

### **Research Questions**

We ask: how do the linguistic components in the discourses on domestic violence reflect societal ideologies? How do linguistic factors trigger the existence of domestic violence in the Bamenda community? And what are men's and women's perceptions of domestic violence as victims? The study is articulated on the assumption that men/women are generally repressed, suppressed, and reprimanded through pejorative and accusative language in their homes in particular and the society at large as far as domestic violence

is concerned. This is essential as a result of the influence of societal ideologies (culture), societal discourse, and the unpleasant linguistic components used on the victims

## **Literature Review**

### **Gender and Linguistic Repertoires**

Gender relation analysis can be examined through reference to linguistic repertoires (Finlayson, 1995). According to Gumperz (1982, p. 177), linguistic repertoires are defined as an individual's particular set of skills (or levels of proficiency) that allows him or her to function within various registers of a language or languages. For example, linguistic repertoires in society may allow people to understand social structural settings, such as power relations, respect, and politeness. He further describes linguistic repertoires as being the properties of both communities and individuals. Whereby some of these members may be identified in terms of gender, age, and social class differences, all of which impact their linguistic interactions. In this research work, then we will mainly look at the linguistic choices made in interaction among the individuals in the Bamenda community through dialogue, to determine whether exchange creates gender imbalance. Men's and women's repertoires will be examined, as the different and similar types of language they use in speaking.

### **Domestic Violence**

The mention of domestic violence, by men, is out of the thought but in reality, it's not true because it is widely believed that it is mostly faced by women in society. According to Chongwain (2006), "domestic violence can either be physical or psychological or verbal but whatever form it takes, the consequences can be overwhelmingly catastrophic on family life". No matter the consequences the victims still keep a sealed lip to their trauma to prevent family drama and draw the attention of the public. But the invisible symptoms turn out to be visible in the long term which includes wounds, scars, and others on the body of the victims.

The theory applicable to this study is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of discourse that views language as a form of social practice. CDA generally assumes that non-linguistic social practice and linguistic practice constitute one another and focus on investigating how societal power relations are established and reinforced through language use. In this part of the study, there are several schools of thought going to help in the analysis of the collected data. These help in the guideline of our thinking as far as this work is concerned. They include as earlier mentioned; CDA theory, conceptual metaphor theory, and the socio-cognitive approach. This is picturing the data to be analyzed includes; that from interviews, questionnaires, and FGDs.

To successfully achieve the above, this study considers some of those rhetorical features (language patterns) which appear to be regular in the language used by media men. They include; the purposive selection and use of pronouns, three-part statements (Thomas and Wareing, 2007),

### **The purposive use of pronouns**

A language is an important tool by which culture is transmitted through human beings. And for them to achieve the desired outcome in their ideology, they make frequent use of pronouns. It becomes obvious that through the calculated and purposive use of certain

pronouns, the audience's attitudes toward the speaker may be influenced or even reversed. Here, our preoccupation is the purposive use of pronouns such as the inclusive and exclusive 'we'- the use of the first-person plural ('we', 'us', 'our'). In this light, we talk of inclusive 'when the individuals spoken including the speaker belong to a referential area of the pronoun. Contrarily, the exclusive 'we' exclude the individual or group of individuals spoken to from its intended referential scope. This study equally examines the purposive use of the 'I' versus 'we'.

### **Lexical and syntactic repetition**

A repetition is an act of writing something again or more than once. Repetition according to Riechild (2006) in English is used to emphasize meaning. Also, according to Halliday and Hassan (1976), lexical and syntactic repetition contributes to the creation of cohesive text, whereby lexical items across the sentences and paragraphs form a cohesive link that helps readers to follow the meaning.

A linguistic representation that results from the shift in the use of words or phrases from the context or domain in which it is expected to occur. Thereby causing semantic tension potentially has linguistic, pragmatic, and cognitive characteristics.

This is the definition applicable to this study especially as its scope also encompasses linguistic, pragmatic, and cognitive characteristics. According to this study, conceptual metaphor perceives acts, thinks, and reasons in day-to-day life. Our conceptual system is just how one structures language for everyone to understand. Conceptual metaphor is seen in our ordinary day-to-day way of thinking, speaking, and acting.

The socio-cognitive approach of CDA was used in two ways in this study. Firstly, it was used in the study of mental representations and processes of language users when they produce and comprehend discourse and participate in verbal interaction, as well as in the knowledge, ideologies, and other beliefs shared by social groups. It was also used to examine how such cognitive phenomena are related to the structures of discourse, verbal interactions, communicative events, and situations like social inequality. Secondly, it was used to show the relationship between the mind, discursive interaction, and society. Given the verbal-symbolic nature of discourse, explicit critical discourse analysis of course needs a solid linguistic basis, where linguistics is understood in a broad sense. It helped to account for detailed structures, strategies, and functions of text and talk. These include; grammatical, pragmatic, interactional, stylistic, rhetorical, semiotic, narrative, argumentative, or similar forms and meanings of the verbal and multimodal communicative events.

### **Methodology**

#### **Area of Study and Target Groups**

This study was carried out in the city of Bamenda. The target groups were both men and women or girls and boys who are currently or had experienced domestic violence. It was assumed that they would be able to recall dangerous situations in their lifetime or current situation. These target groups were approached in their homes and the community. Screening questions were used to determine who would be an appropriate informant or participant in this study. The Snowball technique was used to reach the target sample. Some informants were uncomfortable talking in front of their partners; therefore, the interview was done separately.

The range of informants in this study was from 18 years and above. The majority of the respondents were over 20 years of age. The average age informant in this study was 26 years of age. The informants live in both the Bamenda urban centre and the suburbs. The educational level of the informants ranged from no formal education to a bachelor's degree. Most informants' educational levels ranged from primary school followed by secondary school and high school. The occupation of most female informants is housewife, although some had had working experience either as nurses, teachers, and employees in an NGO. Some had to quit their jobs due to the pressure of the wife's or husband's role in the family which is more valued than other things.

**Data collection and Analysis**

Interviews were used to get information from the victims. These interviews were used to ask about pertinent issues such as the social interaction status of informants and their spouses or partners, what forms of domestic violence they experienced, women's perception, men's perception, responses, and why both men and women experience violence to understand how social factors influence "domestic violence against men and women. The FGD was carried out in 4 women groups; Kunkemnu, Unity sisters, Courage Women, and Little Drops; two men's meeting groups, Wayit, and Ndagan social groups; and one mix-gender meeting group; Balikumbat Youths; Whereby data for textual analysis was gotten.

This study made use of qualitative and quantitative data. In this light, the various linguistic variables showing the existence of domestic violence in the Bamenda community constituted the qualitative analysis. To complement this, quantitative analysis is used to qualify and interpret these linguistic features analysed in the study. The following linguistic variables were taken into account in this study: three-part statements, the purposive use of pronouns, expressing ideology, and conceptual metaphors. The analysis aims to understand the experiences of men/women in their homes, their perception and reaction to domestic violence, the linguistic items, and the surrounding discourse through which they express it.

**Data Presentation**

This research work covers the general information, experiences, and factors related to domestic violence against men and women in the Bamenda community. Firstly, it described the characteristics of the informants, secondly, it addressed the experiences of domestic violence by the victims including the perception towards domestic violence, thirdly which was the main focus it analyzed the linguistic utterances depicting domestic violence from both men and women.

**Characteristics of Informants and Dominant forms of Domestic Violence in the Bamenda Community**

Educational level/ status	Sex	Mar-ried	Sin-Gle	Divor-Ced	Forms/ Status	Sex	Mar-ried	Sin-gle	Divor-ced
None	M	02	-	03	Verbal violence	M	20	10	4
	W	03	-	03		W	21	11	3
Primary	M	13	10	4	Physical violence	M	7	2	1
	W	28	12	4		W	14	8	2

Secondary	M	13	6	3	Economic violence	M	5	1	1
	W	10	11	1		W	8	2	1
Higher education	M	12	4	2	Physiological violence	M	8	7	6
	W	04	04	-		W	12	4	2
Total	M	40	20	12	Total	M	40	20	12
	W	45	25	08		W	45	25	08

Source: Authors' survey data 2022

From the table above, women with a lower level of education suffer more from domestic violence and the most commonly perpetrated or dominant forms of domestic violence are verbal and psychological violence. With this, those with higher levels of education tend to face violence at a median age of 25 – 26 years and above. This is because it is the moment at which they start thinking of fulfilling or meeting up with society's demands of getting married. But those that have a low level of education tend to face violence at a younger age of about 11-24 years of age given the fact that they haven't got much education.

**Occurrences of some commonly used offensive and non-offensive/appreciative lexical items in households in the Bamenda community**

Offensive lexical items	Sex	Married	Single	Divorced	Non-offensive lexical items	Sex	Married	Single	Divorced
Useless man/woman	M	6	3	3	Good wife/husband	M	6	-	3
	W	3	4	1		W	5	-	2
Bad wife/husband	M	4	-	2	Useful man/woman	M	6	2	2
	W	5	-	1		W	4	3	2
Cheat	M	4	4	3	Faithful woman/man	M	4	3	4
	W	-	-	-		W	3	4	2
Prostitute	M	-	-	-	Man/woman enough	M	4	-	-
	W	7	6	3		W	6	-	-
Good for nothing	M	4	4	1	Rich woman /man	M	5	-	-
	W	5	3	-		W	2	-	-
Lazy man/woman	M	3	1	-	Hardworking man/woman	M	2	2	-
	W	5	2	-		W	4	3	-
Drunk	M	4	2	2	Intelligent man/woman	M	2	3	-
	W	3	-	-		W	4	5	-
Barren thing	M	4	-	-	Handsome/beautiful man/woman	M	2	3	-
	W	7	-	2		W	4	5	-
Not man/woman enough	M	4	2	1	Able man/woman	M	4	-	2
	W	5	2	-		W	4	-	1
Orange without juice	M	4	1	-	Smart woman/man	M	2	-	-
	W	6	6	1		W	4	1	-
Poor thing	M	3	3	-	Orange with juice	M	3	7	1
	W	4	2	-		W	4	4	1
Total	M	40	20	12	Total	M	40	20	12
	W	45	25	8		W	45	25	8

Source: Authors' survey data 2022

Verbal violence, as demonstrated in the table above is a prominent form of violence perpetrated in households within the Bamenda community, it is predominantly enacted through the repeated use of some pejorative lexical items such as prostitute, barren thing, useless woman, orange without juice, good for nothing, lazy woman, etc; used against women; and poor thing, lazy man, drunk, cheat, good for nothing, not man enough, useless man, etc; used against men

However, men and women within the Bamenda area seldom appreciate each other through the use of ameliorative expressions such as good wife/husband, useful man/woman, hardworking man/woman, beautiful woman, handsome man, intelligent man/woman, smart man/woman, able man/woman, and many others.

**Evaluation of the degree of violence in households within the Bamenda community and their reactions toward domestic violence**

Degree of violence	Sex	Married	Single	Divorced	Reaction	Sex	Married	Single	Divorced
Low	M	5	13	1	Acceptance	M	25	5	-
	W	10	4	-		W	30	20	-
Average	M	9	2	1	Rejection	M	10	10	10
	W	10	6	1		W	8	3	5
Fair	M	11	3	4	Seek for help	M	5	5	2
	W	11	7	1		W	7	2	3
High	M	13	2	6	Total	M	40	20	12
	W	15	8	6		W	45	25	8
Total	M	40	20	12					
	W	45	25	8					

Source: Authors' survey data 2022

Married and divorced women and men experience the highest degree of domestic violence in the Bamenda community, while single women and men experience the lowest degree. This is since married men and women are bound by their union to bear the better and the worse; while single women are not bound by such constraints. Some divorced women still have strings attached to their previous marriages (children) which hinder their full autonomy or independence.

**Purposive use of pronouns (in the interview sessions and FGDs), Lexical and semantic repetitions in the FGD, interviews, and questionnaires**

Inclusive pronouns			Exclusive pronouns			Repetition of words		
Sex	Pron-Ouns	No of occurrences	Sex	Pron-ouns	No of occurrences	Sex	Words or expressions	Number of occurrences
M	Our	1	M	You	1	M	Useless	12
W	Our	1	W	I	4	W	Useless	8
M	My	3	M	Him	3	M	Ugly partner	6
W	My	-	W	He	-	W	Ugly	6
M	Me	2	M	He	-	M	Cheat	11

W	Me	2	W	Her	2	W	Prostitute	16
M	I	2	M	Myself	1	M	Good for nothing	9
W	I	4	W	My	3	W	Good for nothing	8
						M	Drunk	8
						W	Drunk	3
						M	Not man enough	7
						W	Not woman enough	7
						M	Total	53/72
						W	Total	48/78

Source: Authors' survey data 2022

The repeated use of first-person pronouns (I, we, me, myself) and adjectives (my, our) show the involvement of the informant in the acts of violence. The repeated use of second and third-person pronouns (you, he, him, her) and adjectives (your, his, her) show that some informants deny responsibility for the enactment of violence in the homes and rather put the blame on their partners

### Results and conclusion

Most of the abused victims reported having experienced or experienced multiple forms of violence including physical, emotional, economic, and financial perpetrated by their partners of the opposite sex. However, verbal and psychological violence is the most recurrent form perpetrated in households within the Bamenda community. Ironically, some of the victims, especially the women did not realize they were being violated. Instead, they blamed themselves for being in the wrong and consequently legitimated as their punishment from either their husbands or boyfriends. To avoid violence, most of them chose to improve their behavior as expected of their husbands and men decided to keep quiet as expected of their female partners.

The socio-economic level of the female respondents is slightly lower than that of the male respondents, which reason why women face more domestic violence than men. Education and occupation are not simply direct factors contributing to domestic violence against men and women, the findings indicate that to an extent it influences the responsibility and solving pattern of domestic violence. It was seen that those women with higher educational levels had strategies for solving problems related to domestic violence and also strategies to victimize their partners. On the one hand, those who have low education or low socioeconomic status prefer seeking help from fortunetellers rather than looking for an advanced strategy to solve their problems like seeking the help of the public or relatives. They don't make it public because they were afraid of how society will perceive them. Therefore, women's socio-economic status plays a very crucial role in the way victims solve their problems.

Moreover, this study also highlights the fact that, through socialization into patriarchal values, women internalize powerlessness and submissiveness to men although there are reversals of roles at some points. Regarding this study societal ideology has offered women the submissive and obedient role, but men are offered the

dominant and authoritative role over women and family. It was found that even though some of the men are of lower education or even unemployed, they still have control over the women. In addition, domestic workers are expected to be done by to man, the findings show that women are the majority doing domestic work and men the minority. However, both parties are to be punished when they fail in their duties. This shows that violence against men and women is a punishment they deserve at some point; given the fact that it is a means of dominance over the other. Domestic violence in this study reflects the patriarchal nature of the Bamenda community. Hence, patriarchy is the root cause of domestic violence in the Bamenda community in both social and cultural contexts. Therefore, those women who victimize their male partners want the issues kept secret as well as the victims in order not to be looked upon as bad in society. Also, when men act wrongly, they are easily forgiven by society, unlike women. We noticed here that if victims of domestic violence have social support and family support, the severity of violence might reduce; this is because of the protector's involvement in seeking a solution. According to the findings in this study, victims living in extended families are less likely to face domestic violence than those living in nuclear families.

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