



Sociolinguistic and Stylistic Representations of Marital Conflict in Brice Fansi's *Le Silence*: A Socio-Stylistic Analysis of Language, Power, and Gender in Francophone African Cinema

Amos Damilare IYIOLA

Department of European Studies
University of Ibadan

Email: talk2amosiyiola2014@gmail.com

&

Taiwo Precious ABEL

Postgraduate Student
Department of European Studies
University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

Email:royaldiadem21@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explores how marital conflict is constructed through language, silence, and cinematic technique in *Le Silence* (2019), a Francophone Cameroonian film directed by Brice Fansi. Set against the backdrop of Cameroon's multilingual and culturally layered society, the film offers a compelling portrayal of emotional tension within a marriage. While African cinema has received growing scholarly attention, few studies have examined the linguistic and stylistic mechanisms that shape intimate conflict on screen. To address this gap, the study applies a qualitative, interpretative approach grounded in a socio-stylistic framework that draws on sociolinguistics, stylistics, and film semiotics. Transcribed scenes from the film were analyzed for features such as direct and indirect criticism, sarcasm, stonewalling, and code-switching, alongside metaphor, tone, body language, and *mise-en-scène*. Findings reveal that language and silence function as expressive tools for negotiating power, conveying emotional depth, and reflecting gendered cultural expectations. The husband's linguistic dominance and emotional detachment contrast with the wife's vulnerability and expressive appeals, while shifts between French, English, and indigenous languages mark changes in intimacy, authority, and exclusion. Cinematic techniques such as framing, lighting, and pacing reinforce the psychological distance between characters and deepen the emotional impact of their interactions. The study concludes that *Le Silence* offers a layered and culturally resonant depiction of marital discord, contributing to sociolinguistics by expanding its scope to media analysis, enriching film studies through linguistic insight, and offering practical implications for counseling and education. It recommends interdisciplinary collaboration, media literacy integration, and further research into multilingual cinematic discourse and non-verbal communication.

Keywords: Marital conflict, sociolinguistics, African cinema, code-switching, gender roles, non-verbal communication

Introduction

Marital conflict is a reality that touches lives across continents. In Cameroon, as in many parts of Africa, it often unfolds under the weight of economic hardship, shifting gender expectations, and cultural pressures that shape how couples relate to one another. These tensions can lead to emotional withdrawal,

communication breakdowns, and in severe cases, domestic violence or divorce. The ripple effects are felt not only within families but across communities, influencing child development, mental health, and social cohesion (Cummings and Davies 2002; Fincham and Beach 1999). In this context, film becomes more than entertainment. It serves as a mirror, reflecting the struggles and silences that define many relationships. Cameroonian cinema, especially in the Francophone tradition, has begun to explore these themes with growing nuance.

Brice Fansi's *Le Silence* is one such film. It tells the story of a marriage unraveling not through dramatic outbursts but through quiet resistance, coded language, and the weight of unspoken emotion. Watching it, one is reminded of how silence can speak louder than words, and how language, when used with precision or withheld strategically, can shape the course of a relationship. While scholars have examined marital conflict from psychological and sociological angles (Isola 2024; Adebowale 2007), few have looked closely at how language itself constructs and communicates these tensions in African cinema. This gap matters. Without understanding the linguistic and stylistic choices that drive these portrayals, we miss how power, resistance, and emotion are negotiated in everyday speech and silence. Recent work by Edger (1993) highlights how Nigerian films are beginning to engage with therapeutic narratives around marriage, while Edger (1993) call for deeper sociolinguistic analysis of multilingual African media.

These studies suggest a growing interest in how language reflects and shapes social realities, but there is still much to uncover. This article takes up that challenge. It explores the sociolinguistic features of marital conflict in *Le Silence*, asking how language and silence function as tools of power and resistance. It examines the linguistic strategies used by characters, identifies markers of emotional tension and control, and considers how the film's discourse reflects broader cultural attitudes toward gender and marriage. In doing so, it aims to contribute to sociolinguistics, stylistics, and African film studies, while offering insights that may be useful to counselors, educators, and anyone interested in how language shapes human connection.

Literature Review

Understanding how marital conflict is constructed and communicated in film calls for a multidisciplinary lens. This section reviews key theoretical and empirical contributions from sociolinguistics, stylistics, and film studies that inform the present analysis. By revisiting foundational texts alongside more recent scholarship, it shows how language, silence, and cinematic techniques intersect to portray emotional tension and power dynamics in intimate relationships. It also points to gaps in existing research, especially in Francophone African cinema, where sociolinguistic analysis remains limited despite the region's complex linguistic and cultural landscape.

Theoretical Foundations

This study builds on theoretical perspectives drawn from sociolinguistics, stylistics, and film semiotics to explore how marital conflict is constructed and communicated in *Le Silence*. Each of these fields offers distinct but complementary tools for examining how language, emotion, and visual storytelling shape cinematic meaning. Sociolinguistics provides the foundation for understanding how language reflects and negotiates social relations. John J. Gumperz (1971) explored how linguistic structures interact with social context, while Janet Holmes (2013) highlighted how language mediates identity and power in everyday interaction. He expanded his discussion by examining how linguistic variation indexes social values and group belonging. More recently, Mato (2023) focused on contested interpretations in pragmatic exchanges, offering useful insight into how meaning is negotiated in emotionally charged interactions, a recurring feature in marital disputes.

Stylistics and socio-stylistics help explain how language choices shape tone, mood, and character development. Geoffrey Leech (2007) proposed a framework for analyzing style in narrative texts, later expanded by Paul Simpson (2004) to include multimodal discourse. Their approaches remain valuable for examining how dialogue and silence work stylistically in film. Melgosa (2005) further showed how corpus-based methods can reveal lexical patterns that intensify conflict and shape audience perception. Their work underscores how film dialogue, though often formulaic, carries emotional weight in scenes of tension. Film semiotics adds another layer by analyzing how meaning is conveyed through visual and

auditory signs. Roland Barthes (1977) laid the groundwork for studying signs in cultural texts, while James Monaco (2009) mapped out the grammar of cinematic language, including framing, composition, and narrative structure. Straus (2025) built on these ideas, examining how lighting, camera movement, and character positioning heighten emotional storytelling. His analysis highlights the role of visual cues in shaping audience interpretation, especially in scenes of rupture and emotional strain.

Cinematic conflicts in context

Empirical research on marital conflict consistently points to language as a central force in shaping interpersonal dynamics. John Gottman and Justin A. Driver (2005) identified recurring linguistic patterns, such as criticism, defensiveness, and stonewalling, as strong predictors of relational breakdown. Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson (1987) further explained how face-threatening acts like sarcasm or direct criticism trigger conflict. These early studies shaped our understanding of how language indexes emotion and power struggles in intimate settings. In Africa, research on language, culture, and cinematic representation has gained momentum.

Manthia Diawara (1992) explored how African cinema addresses gender and identity, while Carmela Garritano (2013) examined portrayals of women and domestic life in Nollywood. Although these works highlight cinema's cultural role, they often overlook detailed linguistic analysis. More recent scholarship has started to bridge this gap. Edger (1993) studied the film *Married but Living Single*, showing how cinema can be used to sensitize couples to the emotional and communicative demands of marriage. Ogidan (2025) analyzed pragmatic acts in Biodun Stephen's films, identifying how mocking, threatening, and apologizing function as conflict triggers. Their findings reveal that prosody, metaphor, and shared situational knowledge give Nigerian film dialogue its emotional depth. This aligns with the aims of the present study, which seeks to identify similar patterns in Cameroonian cinema. Multilingualism plays a key role in this context. George Anchimbe (2006) explored how code-switching can signal intimacy, authority, or exclusion, while Carol Myers-Scotton (1993) described its strategic use in multilingual societies. In marital discourse, language shifts often accompany moments of heightened emotion, making them a rich site for sociolinguistic analysis.

Bridging the gap in scholarship

Despite a growing body of work on African cinema, the linguistic and stylistic dimensions of marital conflict remain understudied. Much of the existing research focuses on sociological and psychological causes – such as infidelity, financial stress, and gender inequality – without examining how these issues are linguistically and stylistically represented on screen (Isola 2024; Adebawale 2007). The contributions of Diawara (1992) and Garritano (2013) have been crucial for understanding gender and domestic themes in African film, but their analyses rarely tackle the sociolinguistic mechanisms behind these narratives. More recent work by Edger (1993) focuses on thematic readings of marital crises in Nigerian cinema, while Ogidan (2025) examines pragmatic acts in dialogue. Both offer valuable insights but stop short of addressing Francophone African contexts, where language use carries different social meanings. In Cameroon, where multilingualism is part of daily life, the strategic use of code-switching, silence, and non-verbal cues in film offers fertile ground for sociolinguistic exploration. Anchimbe (2006) and Myers-Scotton (1993) provide important groundwork on these phenomena, but their ideas have not been fully applied to cinematic discourse, especially in the domain of marital conflict. Patrick Djité (2021) also notes that sociolinguistic research in sub-Saharan Africa often overlooks media as a dynamic site of language use.

This study addresses these gaps by offering a socio-stylistic analysis of *Le Silence*, a Cameroonian film that portrays marital discord through layered linguistic and visual storytelling. By examining how language and silence operate as tools of resistance, emotional expression, and cultural commentary, it seeks to deepen our understanding of how African cinema communicates intimate conflict. In doing so, it extends sociolinguistic inquiry beyond speech communities to include film as a powerful space where language, identity, and social change intersect.

Materials and Methods

This study uses a qualitative, interpretative approach grounded in socio-stylistic analysis. The method allows for a close examination of how language, silence, and visual cues work together to portray marital conflict in film. By focusing on the interplay between speech and cinematic technique, the research aims to uncover how emotional tension and power dynamics are communicated. The primary material is *Le Silence*, a 2019 Cameroonian film directed by Brice Fansi. It was chosen for its thematic depth and its nuanced portrayal of a marriage in crisis. Secondary sources include scholarly texts in sociolinguistics, stylistics, and African film studies, which provide the theoretical foundation for the analysis.

Data collection involved transcribing selected scenes that depict moments of conflict between the central couple. These scenes were chosen based on their emotional intensity and linguistic complexity. The analysis focused on identifying patterns such as criticism, defensiveness, stonewalling, and code-switching. Stylistic features like metaphor, silence, tone, and body language were also examined. In addition, visual elements—camera angles, framing, and *mise-en-scène*—were considered to understand how they reinforce or contrast with the spoken dialogue.

Results and Discussion

Results from the analysis of *Le Silence* reveal five central patterns in the portrayal of marital conflict, presented as thematic categories. These include the use of direct and indirect criticism, strategic silence and non-verbal cues, code-switching to signal shifts in intimacy and authority, gendered communicative roles, and cinematic techniques that visually reinforce emotional tension. Together, these findings illustrate how language and visual storytelling work in tandem to reflect cultural expectations and relational dynamics.

When Language Becomes a Battlefield

In *Le Silence*, language is not merely a medium of communication but an instrument through which power, emotion, and identity are negotiated. The couple's exchanges move beyond surface-level disagreement to reveal a sustained battle over control, recognition, and legitimacy. A particularly striking example occurs when the wife exclaims, "You never care about this family!" The choice of wording is significant: it is a direct attack on the husband's character, not on a specific act or omission. This distinction is critical because, as Lyons, J. (1981) explain in his theory of face-threatening acts, criticism that targets personal identity rather than behavior destabilizes interpersonal balance and provokes defensive reactions. In this moment, language ceases to be descriptive; it becomes confrontational. Indirect criticism is equally strategic. When the wife remarks, "I guess I shouldn't expect you to remember anything," sarcasm becomes a linguistic veil through which frustration and disappointment are filtered. This utterance functions on two levels. On the surface, it carries a dismissive tone.

Beneath that surface, however, it conveys a profound sense of disillusionment. John Gottman and Justin A. Driver (2005) note that sarcasm often serves as a regulated outlet for negative affect, allowing speakers to express hostility while maintaining a controlled rhetorical posture. In this context, the wife's sarcasm is not casual irony; it is a carefully modulated form of aggression that avoids open escalation but ensures her dissatisfaction is unmistakable. The husband, for his part, wields language differently. He does not rely on overt accusations or emotional appeals. Instead, his verbal strategy is characterized by minimalism and compression: clipped sentences, abrupt tonal shifts, and carefully selected metaphors that convey distance and irritation without exposing vulnerability. This pattern resonates with broader gendered speech tendencies identified in interpersonal communication research, where men in conflict situations may favor linguistic containment as a means of asserting control. The restraint is deliberate. By refusing to engage

fully, the husband frames himself as the arbiter of when and how communication occurs. His language performs power through omission as much as through utterance.

Silence That Speaks

Silence in *Le Silence* is neither neutral nor passive. It is a carefully deployed communicative act that operates alongside language, shaping the emotional texture of the narrative. The husband's use of silence is particularly strategic. He often withdraws mid-argument, leaving the room or refusing to respond to his wife's attempts to engage. These acts of withdrawal are not mere lapses in communication; they are performances of control. By withholding speech, the husband denies the wife access to dialogue, thereby asserting his power over the conversational terrain.

Janet Holmes (2013) has described this form of silence as emotional withdrawal, a communicative strategy that signals dominance through disengagement rather than confrontation. The wife's silence carries a different set of meanings. Initially, she responds vocally to every provocation, attempting to repair the rupture through speech. Over time, however, her voice diminishes. She lowers her gaze, crosses her arms, and sits in stillness. This transformation is significant. It signals a shift from engagement to protest. As John J. Gumperz (1971) argues, silence is a semiotic resource capable of conveying meanings that speech cannot fully capture. Her silence does not indicate submission; it signals exhaustion, refusal, and emotional self-protection.

The film's formal construction amplifies these silent moments. Long pauses punctuate key scenes, creating temporal voids in which the weight of unspoken emotion becomes palpable. The camera often lingers on the wife's face as she retreats into silence, forcing the viewer to inhabit the discomfort of suspended communication. This narrative strategy foregrounds silence as a textual presence, not a narrative absence, reinforcing its role as a powerful communicative act.

Shifting Tongues, Shifting Power

The multilingual setting of *Le Silence* reflects the linguistic complexity of Cameroonian society and functions as a critical tool for negotiating emotional and power relations. Characters shift fluidly between French, English, and indigenous languages, and each shift is contextually motivated. At a particularly tense moment, the husband switches from everyday speech to formal French. This linguistic elevation creates distance, framing him as the rational, authoritative figure and positioning his wife as emotionally excessive. Carol Myers-Scotton (1993) notes that code-switching can serve as a power index, marking shifts in identity, authority, and social boundaries. The wife, in contrast, code-switches to her native dialect during moments of vulnerability and emotional intensity. This choice does more than convey personal feeling; it roots her voice in a cultural identity that predates and transcends the marital conflict. By drawing on the intimacy of her mother tongue, she reclaims agency in a discursive space where she has been marginalized.

George Anchimbe (2006) observes that in Cameroon, language choices are rarely neutral; they signal belonging, exclusion, and the politics of voice. Here, her linguistic turn acts as a counter-discourse, resisting the husband's attempts to define the terms of the conversation. These language shifts are deliberate and layered. French carries authority, English mediates, and the indigenous language conveys emotional authenticity. Code-switching thus functions as a discursive strategy, enabling characters to reposition themselves within the evolving power dynamics of their relationship.

Gender Scripts and Cultural Expectations

The power dynamics in *Le Silence* are deeply embedded in broader cultural narratives of gender and marital expectations. The husband embodies a familiar construction of masculinity: emotionally guarded, economically authoritative, and socially entitled to withdraw from difficult conversations. The wife, by contrast, performs emotional labor, continually initiating discussions, making appeals, and seeking resolution. This distribution of communicative roles reflects what Manthia Diawara (1992) identifies as the gendered asymmetry often portrayed in African cinema, where female characters are positioned as the emotional custodians of domestic spaces.

Their linguistic behavior reinforces these roles. His short, declarative utterances establish conversational boundaries, while her extended speech patterns reflect a continual investment in relational repair. Carmela Garritano (2013) highlights how such portrayals mirror societal structures in which women are expected to sustain emotional equilibrium, often at significant personal cost. The husband's silence and terse language are framed as authority, whereas the wife's verbosity is coded as emotional excess. Yet *Le Silence* does not merely reproduce these cultural scripts; it critiques them. As the narrative progresses, the wife's withdrawal from dialogue is not framed as failure but as strategic disengagement. Her silence functions as a refusal to continue performing unpaid emotional labor.

This reversal destabilizes traditional gender expectations and forces the audience to confront the costs of these asymmetrical roles.

When the Camera Speaks

The visual language of *Le Silence* operates in concert with its verbal and non-verbal communication, reinforcing the emotional architecture of conflict. Early scenes are marked by warm lighting and close spatial framing that conveys intimacy. As the relationship deteriorates, the visual palette shifts. Cooler tones dominate conflict scenes, casting the domestic space in a detached, almost sterile light. Characters are increasingly framed apart, their physical distance mirroring their emotional estrangement. One of the most evocative images in the film shows the wife standing alone in a narrow corridor, her silhouette sharply outlined against the light. This composition does more than illustrate loneliness; it visualizes communicative isolation, transforming silence into image. Slow camera movements, extended takes, and minimal editing allow tension to accumulate gradually, compelling the viewer to inhabit the discomfort of stalled communication.

Symbolism operates throughout the film's *mise-en-scène*. Closed doors, mirror reflections, and physical barriers recur as visual motifs, each reinforcing the breakdown of connection. James Monaco (2009) emphasizes that visual metaphors can articulate emotional subtext with a clarity that language cannot. In *Le Silence*, these images work in tandem with dialogue and silence to create a multi-layered narrative system, where meaning emerges not from a single channel but from the interplay between speech, silence, and image. This integration of verbal, non-verbal, and visual elements reflects a sophisticated understanding of how conflict is communicated in intimate relationships. The film does not rely on speech alone to tell its story; it constructs meaning through a dense network of signs, each reinforcing and complicating the others. In doing so, it foregrounds communication itself—not simply marital discord—as the central subject of its narrative inquiry.

Conclusion

This study has examined the sociolinguistic and stylistic construction of marital conflict in *Le Silence*, a Cameroonian film that offers a nuanced portrayal of emotional tension within intimate relationships. The analysis demonstrates that both language and silence serve as powerful communicative tools, shaping the

emotional depth and narrative progression of the film. Verbal strategies such as direct criticism, sarcasm, and code-switching reveal underlying power dynamics and emotional strain, while silence and non-verbal cues, such as body language and physical distancing, convey resistance, withdrawal, and psychological complexity. The findings indicate that sociolinguistic features within the film reflect broader societal norms and gender ideologies prevalent in Cameroonian culture. The representation of masculinity and femininity, as well as the communicative roles assigned to each partner, underscore the influence of cultural expectations on marital discourse. These insights contribute meaningfully to the fields of sociolinguistics, stylistics, and African film studies.

The implications of this research are multifaceted. For sociolinguistics, it expands the scope of inquiry to include media texts as valuable sites for analyzing language use in culturally specific contexts. For film studies, it bridges linguistic analysis with cinematic technique, offering a comprehensive framework for interpreting character interaction and emotional expression. For counseling and education, the study provides practical insights into communicative patterns that may inform therapeutic approaches and pedagogical strategies. In light of these findings, several recommendations are proposed. Interdisciplinary collaboration between linguists, filmmakers, and counselors should be encouraged to foster deeper understanding of language in narrative and relational contexts. Media literacy should be integrated into counseling and educational programs to enhance awareness of communicative behavior as portrayed in film. Furthermore, African filmmakers should be supported in their efforts to explore sociolinguistic themes, as their work offers critical perspectives on language, identity, and social transformation. Future research may extend this study by conducting comparative analyses across African films that depict marital conflict, thereby uncovering cross-cultural variations in linguistic and emotional expression. Corpus-based approaches could also be employed to identify recurring patterns in cinematic dialogue. Additionally, further investigation into the role of silence and gesture in multilingual film contexts would enrich our understanding of non-verbal communication and its narrative significance.

Le Silence presents a compelling exploration of marital discord, illustrating how language and silence operate not only as narrative devices but as reflections of cultural and emotional realities. Through a socio-stylistic lens, this study has illuminated the intricate ways in which communication shapes, and is shaped by, the complexities of human relationships.

References

- Adebowale, A. (2007). Educational evaluation and quality control in secondary education in Nigeria. In Obemeata (Ed.), *Evaluation in Africa*. Stirling-Horden Publishers (Nigeria) Ltd.
- Anchimbe, E. A. (2006). Languages and discourses in Cameroon. Peter Lang.
- Barthes, R. (1977). Image, music, text (S. Heath, Trans.). Fontana Press.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). Politeness: Some universals in language usage. Cambridge University Press.
- Cummings, E., & Davies, P. (2002). Effects of marital conflict on children: Recent advances and emerging themes in process-oriented research. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 43(1), 31–63.
- Diawara, M. (1992). African cinema: Politics and culture. Indiana University Press.
- Edger, D. (1996). What will make marriage work. In D. Sper (Ed.), *Family marital relationships*. Radio Bible Class. Grand Rapids, MI: Grand Editorial Safe Liz, Faculty of Education, University of Abuja.
- Fansi, B. (Director). (2019). *Le Silence* [Film]. Cameroon.
- Fincham, F., & Beach, S. (1999). Conflict in marriage: Implications for working with couples. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 50(1).

- Garritano, C. (2013). African video movies and global desires: A Ghanaian history. Ohio University Press.
- Gottman, J. M., & Driver, J. L. (2005). Dysfunctional marital conflict and everyday marital interaction. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 43(3–4), 63–78. https://doi.org/10.1300/J087v43n03_04
- Gumperz, J. J. (1971). Language in social groups: Essays by John J. Gumperz. Stanford University Press.
- Holmes, J. (2013). An introduction to sociolinguistics (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Isola, M. (2024). Development and validation of scale to measure marital conflict among married individuals in Ibadan metropolis, Oyo State, Nigeria: A psychometric study. Department of Counselling and Human Development Studies, University of Ibadan.
- Leech, G. N., & Short, M. H. (2007). Style in fiction: A linguistic introduction to English fictional prose (2nd ed.). Pearson Longman.
- Lyons, J. (1981). Language and linguistics: An introduction. Cambridge University Press.
- Mato, I. (2023, October 17). *Marriage advice today*. [Online article].
- Melgosa, J., & Melgosa, A. (2005). New lifestyle: To couples enjoying a stable lifelong relationship. Madrid.
- Monaco, J. (2009). How to read a film: Movies, media, and beyond (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Myers-Scotton, C. (1993). Social motivations for codeswitching: Evidence from Africa. Clarendon Press.
- Ogidan, R. (2025). Marital adjustment problems of educated, employed and unemployed married couples in selected areas.
- Simpson, P. (2004). *Stylistics: A resource book for students*. Routledge.
- Straus, M. (2025). Measuring intrafamily conflict and violence: The Conflict Tactics (CT) Scales.