

Socio-cultural and Discursive Analysis of Verbal Violence in Festus Iyayi's *Violence*

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Abstract

This paper explores the manifestation of verbal violence in Festus Iyayi's *Violence*. It argues that, like physical aggression, verbal hostility inflicts significant harm on individuals. To achieve its thematic goal, the study situates its analysis within the social and cultural contexts portrayed in the novel. Instances of verbal abuse are identified, categorised, and examined through both qualitative and quantitative approaches to uncover recurring patterns in the speech of aggressors. The central focus is to expose the linguistic structures employed by perpetrators and to examine the effects of such verbal assaults on their victims. The study adopts Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, which foregrounds the role of language in shaping social relations and ideologies. The findings reveal that language constitutes a crucial tool in societal interactions and should, therefore, be critically examined as a medium of verbal violence, as demonstrated in Iyayi's *Violence* and its contemporary relevance.

Keywords: Language Use, Verbal Violence, Discourse Analysis, Socio-cultural

Introduction

Language occupies a central position in human society and remains an indispensable element in the interpretation of texts. It serves as the primary means of communication and social interaction. Aquilina (1986) observes that humanity would be inconceivable without language because of its essential role in expressing thought and facilitating coexistence. Similarly, scholars such as Rabiah (2012) and Sirbu (2015) emphasise that language enables individuals to express emotions, share beliefs, shape identities, and connect with others.

Yet, in the course of using language to perform these functions, speakers also reproduce and sustain social phenomena such as power, ideology, identity, and gender, elements that constitute the foundation of human societies (Banga&Suri, 2015). Wodak (2012) notes that power and identity are discursively constructed across various social contexts, hence, the necessity of an interdisciplinary framework such as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine language in relation to social practices and hierarchies.

In response to this need to explore the relationship between language and power, Roger Fowler and other scholars developed the theory of Critical Linguistics (CL) in the 1970s, later evolving into CDA. Their intention was to address the gaps in sociolinguistics which had paid limited attention to the linguistic construction of power and inequality (Wodak, 2001). Among the key contributors to CDA is Norman Fairclough of the Lancaster School who expanded the field, offering a more rigorous analytical framework for investigating social hierarchies and ideological control through language. CDA, therefore, explains how linguistic structures reflect

and sustain relations of power and draws insights from the works of social theorists such as Karl Marx, Michel Foucault, and Pierre Bourdieu.

Appraising the Notion of Violence

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines violence as the “intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or a group or community,” which may result in injury, psychological harm, or deprivation. Violence thus extends beyond physical acts to include mental, emotional, and verbal forms, which may be direct or indirect and often occur within social, cultural, educational, and familial contexts. Lawson (n.d.) as cited in (Koller and Darida, 2020 pp.2-3), identifies four major forms of violence as: physical, emotional, verbal, and sexual, and explains that verbal violence involves humiliation, harassment, or labelling through communication patterns.

In an interview with Adedeji in Benin (2006), Festus Iyayi avers that violence is not only restricted to physical violence. He asserts that the most profound form of violence is rooted in social injustice, the systemic deprivation that prevents individuals from realizing their potential due to deliberate actions of the ruling class. For Iyayi, genuine social transformation requires a society that prioritizes the welfare and dignity of the working class. His vision, as expressed in *Violence*, advocates a just and humane redistribution of resources, challenging the structural oppression maintained by the elites.

Reviewing the Concept of Verbal Violence

The National Resource Centre on Domestic Violence (NRCDV) defines verbal violence as the use of language: words, phrases, and expressions to inflict psychological or emotional harm. It is often employed as a tool for domination and control within social relationships. Dewall et al. (2011) observe that verbal violence has gained increasing attention in communication studies due to its pervasive impact and growing societal concern about violent behaviour.

Verbal violence encompasses speech acts that degrade, threaten, or manipulate others, often producing lasting trauma, shame, or diminished self-worth. Ozgule (2016) describes it as psychic violence, a verbal act that undermines confidence and induces helplessness. Havryliv (2017) further defines it as any verbal expression intended to hurt others, including insults, ridicule, slander, or threats. Likewise, Ejiaso (2024) notes that such violence is frequently perpetrated by those closest to the victim, especially, in family settings, where harsh or demeaning language can result in deep psychological injury.

Tarhemba (2018) identifies verbal violence as a communicative behaviour characterised by blaming, labelling, and scapegoating, while psychologists broadly classify it as a dimension of emotional abuse manifested through verbal aggression, mockery, threats, or persistent criticism. Yun et al. (2019) describe it as a form of psychological violence aimed at humiliating or instilling fear in the victim, with significant effects on mental health and even brain structure. Similarly, Rosenthal et al. (2018) and Koller and Darida (2020) conceptualise it as language use that insults, labels, or diminishes others. Hunt (2013) adds that verbal violence reflects one's moral and social orientation, as the words people choose often reveal their values and levels of civility.

In essence, verbal violence often termed “violence against feelings”, involves the use of demeaning or threatening language that harms others without physical contact. Over time, such speech can escalate into physical aggression, highlighting the critical role of language in both reflecting and instigating violence.

Review of Previous Studies and Identification of Research Gap

A considerable number of studies have examined Festus Iyayi's *Violence* from both linguistic and literary viewpoints, with some also addressing the issue of verbal violence. Ademola (2019) conducted a stylistic analysis of ideological discourse in Iyayi's *Violence*, *The Contract*, and *Heroes*, seeking to establish the link between language and ideology as a tool for societal transformation. Their study underscores the interdependence between language and literature, arguing that linguistic choices shape literary meaning and ideological positioning. Using Marxist theory, they assert that literary works should be understood as products of their socio-historical contexts. Their findings highlight Iyayi's use of narrative strategies such as dialogue, diction, and authorial commentary to communicate ideological perspectives. Similarly, Diani and Yunita (2022) offered a propagandist interpretation of violence, emphasising the relationship between art and life. The study situates literature within the socio-political realities it represents, underscoring the capacity of writers to engage national concerns such as security, leadership, and development. Their study describes violence as a Marxist-inspired text that condemns exploitation, deprivation, and the absence of patriotism in Nigeria, portraying literature as a reflection of and response to prevailing societal conditions.

In the same vein, Abubakar and Mani (2014) examined the representation of the working class in African fiction, using violence as a reference point. Drawing from Frantz Fanon's Marxist theory of violence, they explore how Iyayi depicts workers' struggles for survival under capitalist exploitation. Their study argues that the working class's suffering is rooted in the lingering effects of both colonialism and neo-colonialism, which perpetuate inequality and oppression.

Ahmed and Malik (2025) applied Kenneth Boulding's theory of protest to the Nigerian social environment and used it to interpret violence. Their study exposes the entrenched class stratification between the rich and the poor, demonstrating how Iyayi's narrative highlights social inequities and deepening poverty in Nigeria. Similarly, Tarhamba, et al. (2018) investigated violence from a Marxist ideological standpoint, focusing on exploitation and dehumanization in postcolonial Nigeria. Their work concludes that class conflict is an inevitable outcome of capitalist systems and that true social liberation requires a collective, revolutionary response from the oppressed masses.

Beyond literary analyses of violence, other scholars have examined the dynamics of verbal violence more broadly. Koller and Darida (2020) explored the causes and mitigation of verbal aggression, defining it as communicative behaviour involving humiliation, harassment, and labeling. They propose preventive strategies suited for the digital era, including fostering respectful communication habits, promoting positive criticism, upholding privacy, and maintaining communication ethics.

Raeda et al. (2022) adopted a critical discourse analysis approach to investigate verbal abuse in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, identifying the linguistic structures used by abusers and their psychological impact on victims. Their study highlights how language can serve as a vehicle of harm within literary and real-life contexts. Similarly, Khalifa (1999) examined verbal abuse as a form of psychological maltreatment, focusing on the relationship between parental verbal aggression and children's emotional development. The study found strong correlations between verbal abuse and negative psychological outcomes such as depression, anxiety, stress, anger, and low self-esteem, with male children showing greater hostility towards their mothers than females. The research concludes that verbal abuse has both immediate and long-term detrimental effects on children's mental and emotional wellbeing.

In summary, the reviewed literature demonstrates that while previous scholars have examined violence from ideological, sociological, and Marxist perspectives, as well as investigated verbal abuse from psychological and discourse-analytic viewpoints, there remains a gap in exploring verbal violence within Iyayi's *Violence* through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis. This study therefore seeks to fill that gap by examining how language structures in the novel enact and reinforce verbal violence and social power relations.

Theoretical Framework

This section presents the theoretical foundation that guides the analysis of verbal violence in *Violence*. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) serves as the framework for this study, as it provides a suitable lens for examining how language constructs, maintains, and challenges social power relations. Scholars generally regard CDA as more of a theoretical orientation or research movement than a single discipline, since it encompasses multiple approaches to studying language in relation to ideology, identity, and power (Breeze, 2011). In essence, CDA represents an extension of discourse analysis that foregrounds the social function of language, particularly, in contexts involving domination, inequality, and resistance. This is against the backdrop that CDA is interdisciplinary and it draws insights from various traditions. The study, therefore, considers three major approaches: Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak, and Teun van Dijk, which together provide a comprehensive basis for examining language use and verbal violence. However, for the sake of the analysis Fairclough's approach and Evan's model were utilised.

Norman Fairclough's Socio-Cultural Approach

Fairclough (2014) emphasises that language is deeply embedded in social life and serves as both a reflection and a constitutive element of social structures. His view builds on Halliday's systemic functional linguistics, which conceives language as a system for making meaning rather than merely a collection of grammatical signs (Zotmann & O'Regan, 2016). Fairclough introduced the idea of dialectical relationship between language and society, each shaping and being shaped by the other.

In his framework, three central concepts are particularly relevant: ideology, power, and discourse. Ideology refers to the system of beliefs and values that members of a group share and use to interpret their world (Van Dijk, 1998). Power, on the other hand, manifests in how speakers use language to influence or control others, while discourse represents the communicative exchange through which ideologies are expressed and social relations enacted. Fairclough's model is organised into a three-dimensional framework consisting of text, discursive practice, and social practice as explained below (Okata, 2019).

- i. Text involves both spoken and written discourse and focuses on linguistic features such as vocabulary, syntax, and cohesion.
- ii. Discursive practice concerns how texts are produced, distributed, and interpreted within particular contexts, essentially the rules and conventions governing communication.
- iii. Social practice refers to the broader socio-cultural conditions and institutional contexts in which discourse occurs.

This model thus enables analysts to uncover the implicit ideologies and power structures embedded within language use.

Ruth Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA)

Wodak's approach often associated with the Vienna School shares with Fairclough an interest in language as a means of enacting and maintaining social structures. However, Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) adds a strong emphasis on historical and contextual dimensions. According to Wodak, CDA must account for

four interrelated levels: the immediate use of language, the relationships among texts and genres, the wider sociological and institutional context, and the historical or political background in which discourse emerges (Wooffitt, 2005). DHA integrates background knowledge about social and historical circumstances that shape communication. It identifies discursive strategies that reveal how dominance and prejudice are linguistically constructed (KhosraviNik, 2010). These strategies include:

- i. Referential strategies, which mark social groups through naming, metaphors, or categorization to emphasize inclusion or exclusion;
- ii. Predicational strategies, which attribute positive characteristics to in-groups and negative ones to out-groups;
- iii. Argumentation strategies, which rely on topoi (lines of reasoning) to justify or challenge inclusion, discrimination, or hierarchy; and
- iv. Perspectivization, which reflects the speaker's stance, perspective, or ideological positioning within discourse.

Through these strategies, DHA helps uncover how historical narratives and social inequalities persist through language.

Teun van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Approach

Van Dijk complements the work of Fairclough and Wodak by introducing a cognitive dimension to CDA. He argues that social cognition serves as the interface between discourse and society, explaining how mental representations and group ideologies influence linguistic choices. By combining linguistic, cognitive, and social theories, van Dijk provides a model that connects textual features to broader social meanings.

Van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) distinguish between microstructures, the local structures of language use such as word choice and syntax, and macrostructures, which relate to global themes like power and dominance. For van Dijk (1993), understanding how individuals process and interpret discourse reveals how social inequality is reproduced through everyday communication.

He also proposes several analytical categories that connect cognition to social interaction,

- i. Members–groups, which recognize that individuals communicate as members of social collectives whose values and ideologies shape their language;
- ii. Actions–processes, which emphasize that social actions and events are collectively constructed through discourse; and
- iii. Context–social structure, which highlights that discourse occurs within institutional and cultural frameworks that both constrain and reflect social power relations (Salma, 2019).

Together, these perspectives show that CDA operates at the intersection of language, cognition, and society, enabling a nuanced understanding of how verbal violence, as depicted in Iyayi's *Violence*, functions both as a linguistic and social phenomenon.

Research Methodology

This study adopts both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The analysis is drawn from selected excerpts of Festus Iyayi's *Violence*, focusing on instances of verbal violence as they occur in the text. These instances are identified, categorized, and critically examined based on the framework provided by Evans (2009) in his work: *The Verbally Abusive Relationship*. The data are analysed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

as the analytical lens to uncover the linguistic and ideological structures that reveal patterns of verbal violence and their effects on the victims.

The patterns of verbal violence refer to the linguistic and behavioural traces that indicate the presence of verbal abuse. They serve as observable signs that help in recognising how verbal aggression manifests in interpersonal relationships within the novel. The forms of verbal violence, as identified by Evans (2009), are discussed below with textual illustrations drawn from *Violence*.

- a) Accusing and Blaming: This involves placing unreasonable blame on others for events beyond their control. It appears once in the data, exemplified when Queen accuses Idemudia of organizing his fellow labourers to go on strike.
- b) Abusive Anger: Characterised by yelling, shouting, or screaming in aggression, whether justified or not. It appears seven times in the text.
- c) Denial: The refusal to acknowledge the consequences of one's actions, often coupled with rationalization or justification of abusive behaviour.
- d) Withholding: The deliberate refusal to share necessary information, thereby silencing or manipulating the victim. For example, an older labourer withholds crucial information from Idemudia to silence him: "If you want to work, you must keep your lips sealed. Even if you are being fried alive, even if you are being worked like slaves." (p. 248)
- e) Discounting: This entails denying or invalidating another person's emotions, thoughts, or experiences, thereby, diminishing their sense of worth.
- f) Countering: A strategy that halts all meaningful conversation by persistently contradicting or disputing the victim's statements, often with hostility or anger.
- g) Name Calling: A direct form of verbal violence that involves demeaning or belittling labels such as "idiot," "fool," or "worthless." It appears eight times in the text, for example: "That is how they are, callous and unfeeling." (p. 158); "I told you before that you are a fool." (p. 308).
- h) Ordering: This involves controlling the victim through constant demands or commands. It appears four times, for example: "Clean that table quickly and go after that woman for some eggs." (p. 210).
- i) Forgetting: A manipulative act involving denial or selective memory to evade accountability. This form does not appear in the data.
- j) Threatening: A direct form of coercion used to control or instill fear in the victim. It appears four times in the text, for instance, when Idemudia assaults his wife and threatens her for trying to prevent him from going out (p. 16).
- k) Trivializing: This occurs when the abuser repeatedly minimises or dismisses the victim's feelings, opinions, or desires, making them seem insignificant. It appears five times in the text.
- l) Judging and Criticising: Involves persistent negative evaluations that undermine the victim's self-esteem. It appears twice in the text.
- m) Verbal Abuse Disguised as Jokes: Masking insults or demeaning remarks as humour. It appears three times, e.g., "You are looking for manna from heaven." (p. 20).
- n) Undermining: Closely related to trivializing, this form involves contradicting or dismissing the victim's opinions and decisions, thereby, diminishing their confidence. It appears twice in the text.
- o) Blocking and Diverting: A form of withholding in which the abuser avoids or changes the subject to prevent meaningful dialogue.

By classifying and analysing these forms of verbal violence, the study aims to uncover the underlying power relations, ideological constructs, and social implications embedded in the language of violence. The integration of CDA provides a comprehensive means to interpret how language functions as a tool of control, dominance, and resistance within Iyayi's socio-political narrative.

Analysis and Discussion

A Summary of the Text: *Violence*

For a proper understanding of the work, it is pertinent that a summary of the text is provided before delving into the proper analysis of the work.

Festus Iyayi's *Violence* (1979) mirrors the social context of postcolonial Nigerian society. The novel revolves around the life of Idemudia, a poor, unemployed man in his late twenties, who faces severe hardship and struggles to survive. In his desperate attempt to provide for himself and his wife, Adisa, he goes to the extreme of selling his blood. Yet, each attempt to escape poverty only offers temporary relief. When he finally secures a menial job as a labourer, he clings to it desperately, only to collapse from overwork and exhaustion. Confined to his sick bed, Idemudia reflects bitterly that "his unfinished education, his joblessness, his hunger, his poverty all these were different forms of violence exerting themselves on him."

Similarly, in a desperate bid to pay her husband's hospital bills, Adisa succumbs to adultery, an act that nearly destroys their marriage. However, Idemudia later recognises that both he and his wife are victims of systemic and societal "violence" perpetuated by figures such as Queen, Obofun, and the broader social structure. Although the novel is set in 1970 in Nigeria, it reflects greatly the struggles faced by countless jobless youths today caught up in cycles of poverty, exploitation, and moral compromise.

Textual Analysis

This section presents the analysis of selected excerpts from the text *Violence*, based on the forms of verbal violence identified by Evans (2009). Each instance is examined through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to reveal patterns of domination, control, and resistance embedded in the characters' language use.

Excerpt 1

Threatening: A prominent form of verbal violence in the novel is threatening. This appears early in the text when Idemudia confronts his wife during a quarrel:

"Leave the door unless you want to cry." (p. 21)

Here, Idemudia asserts dominance over Adisa through coercive speech. The threat implies physical violence, underscoring the power imbalance in their relationship. His further statement—"You let another man come near you and I will kill you." (p. 23)

The statement reveals a patriarchal mindset rooted in control and possessiveness.

Another instance occurs when a nurse threatens Adisa about her husband's hospital debt:

"We shall definitely find out where your husband is and when we do, both of you will be sorry." (p. 74). Such statements illustrate how verbal threats function as instruments of social and institutional power.

Excerpt 2

Name Calling: Name calling serves as a recurring strategy of humiliation and devaluation. When Idemudia quarrels with Adisa, he lashes out violently:

“You bastard! You fool!” (p. 22). Queen also employs this form of abuse when addressing Idemudia:

“You are a rare kind of poor man, but you are foolish, extremely foolish and stubborn.” (p. 297)

Similarly, Aunt Salome calls Idemudia “a fool” (p. 55), reinforcing social hierarchies and gendered contempt. These instances show that language becomes a weapon used to reinforce control, mock weakness, and assert superiority.

Excerpt 3

Discounting: Discounting manifests in the language of Mr. Clerides, a Greek Supervisor who devalues the Nigerian labourers’ worth:

“These houses must go up faster. No standing about, break reduced by thirty minutes. If you are not satisfied, you go and we hire somebody else.” (p. 239)

By trivializing their grievances and threatening replacement, he invalidates the workers’ rights and humanity. His fabricated stories to justify dismissals further exemplify institutionalized verbal oppression.

Excerpt 4

Accusing and Blaming: Idemudia’s own reflections reveal internalized verbal aggression when he blames society for his suffering:

“A man gets a job and cannot protest... This was slavery, this was violence.” (p. 51)

Similarly, Queen’s accusation of Idemudia:

“I gave you a job to help you, and the first thing you do is to organize the workers against me!” (p. 294). The statement illustrates how the ‘Powerful’ utilises the weapon of blame to maintain dominance and suppress resistance.

Excerpt 5

Judging and Criticizing: Queen’s verbal attack on her husband, Obofun, represents another layer of verbal violence:

“Do you ever find time for anybody but yourself? What do you do but run around with other people’s wives?” (p. 199)

Her criticism shifts from moral to retaliatory when she adds:

“I have slept with your friends! I have enjoyed myself as much as you have.” (p. 200)

Through this exchange, verbal aggression becomes both a form of revenge and a means of reclaiming agency, highlighting the cyclical nature of abuse.

Excerpt 6

Verbal Abuse Disguised as Jokes: Mockery and sarcasm also serve as tools of abuse. When Idemudia is bedridden, a neighbour remarks:

“The rascal... perhaps the hospital bed is too comfortable; they should give him wooden beds with grass mattresses.” (p. 141)

Although framed humorously, the statement trivializes Idemudia's suffering. Similarly, Queen mocks Idemudia's hesitation:

"What a man! A man who has to drink whisky before he has the courage to lie beside a woman?" (p. 303)

Such humour disguises contempt, revealing psychological manipulation beneath playful tones.

Excerpt 7

Trivialising

Queen trivialises her workers' worth by dismissing them harshly:

"Here is your money... not one kobo more, not one less." (p. 242)

Her action dehumanizes the labourers, turning their economic survival into a game of dominance. Her condescending remarks to Idemudia criticising his sweat and hygiene further reduce him to a symbol of inferiority.

Excerpt 8

Abusive Anger: Abusive anger frequently surfaces in confrontational scenes. Salome, exasperated by Adisa's loyalty, shouts:

"You are doomed—as doomed as an obstinate child who closes his eyes to his mother's advice and gets drowned!" (p. 260)

Likewise, Queen's fury when Idemudia rejects her advances manifests as violent dismissal:

"Now get out of my house and do not appear any more on my site! The police will be waiting for you there!" (p. 310). These outbursts embody power struggles expressed through emotional aggression.

The table below shows the occurrences of verbal violence in the text, *Violence*.

Table 1

Verbal Violence Form	Number of Occurrences
Accusing and blaming	1
Abusive anger	7
Denial	0
Withholding	2
Discounting	2
Countering	2
Name calling	9
Ordering	4
Forgetting	0
Trivialising	4
Judging and criticising	2
Verbal abuse in disguise as a joke	4
Undermining	2
Blocking and diverting	2

Verbal violence, unlike physical violence, is often subtle and covert, making it difficult for victims to identify. However, its psychological impact is profound. Within the text, its effects manifest in several ways:

1. **Guilt:** Victims internalize blame, as seen when Obofun feels remorse after Queen confronts him about infidelity.
2. **Acquiescence and Submission:** Continuous verbal assault leads to reluctant compliance, as victims yield to maintain peace or avoid further humiliation.
3. **Low Self-Worth:** Persistent belittlement erodes confidence, evident in Idemudia's growing sense of helplessness and inferiority.
4. **Emotional Distance:** Victims become detached, suppressing their emotions to cope with psychological pain.

Ultimately, Iyayi's *Violence* exposes verbal aggression as a reflection of broader social, political, and economic oppression. Through CDA, it becomes clear that the use of language whether in domestic, professional, or social contexts serves as a microcosm of the power struggles.

Conclusion

This study presents Festus Iyayi as a socially conscious writer whose creative vision is deeply shaped by the pervasive inequalities and injustices within Nigerian society. The analysis reveals that the deplorable living conditions of the poor in *Violence* underscore the persistent problem of economic deprivation, which manifests as class conflict and verbal aggression. Iyayi's characters, though portrayed as victims of structural oppression, also become complicit in perpetuating violence both physical and verbal in their struggle for survival and power.

Findings from the study indicate various manifestations of verbal violence such as criticism, name-calling, trivialization, undermining, threats, and abusive anger. These linguistic patterns reflect the dynamics of dominance and resistance embedded in the characters' interactions. In particular, Queen's manipulation of her workers exemplifies how language can be used as a weapon to exploit social and economic vulnerabilities. Ultimately, the study reaffirms that verbal violence, though less visible than physical brutality, remains a potent instrument of oppression and control within Iyayi's fictional society and, by extension, in the larger human experience.

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