

CONTEXTUAL CONSTRAINTS ON INTONATION CHOICES IN FAMILY CONFLICTS IN CHINWE EGWUAGU'S *MR & MRS*

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Abstract

Family conflicts, with their societal impacts, are a central feature of discourse in different media, including English Nollywood films. While previous studies have examined ideological clashes, conflict discourse, and gendered language use, little attention has been given to how contexts influence intonation in Nigerian family conflicts. This study therefore investigates the intonation patterns used by family members in Chinwe Oguagu's *Mr & Mrs*, focusing on the contextual factors that shape their intonation choices. The analysis adopted Brazil's (1975) Discourse Intonation model and Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Acts theory as theoretical framework. Four discourse intonation patterns were identified: proclaiming fall (PFT), referring rise (RRT), proclaiming rise-fall (PRFT), and referring fall-rise (RFRT), along varying pitch, prominence, and intensity to encode pragmatic meaning. Contextual factors strongly constrain these choices: patriarchal dominance, unmet expectations, gender role assignments, sexual responsibility, and physical/psychological stress shape how characters deploy intonation to assert authority, signal protest, or manage relational tensions. Male characters predominantly use high-pitch, emphatic PFTs, interruptions, and increased intensity to assert control, while female characters employ mitigated contours and mid/low pitch to show compliance or appeal for empathy, but RRT or PRFT with high pitch to resist subjugation or signal frustration. Findings demonstrate that intonation in Nigerian English is highly context-sensitive, reflecting societal norms, gendered power structures, and psychological state of speakers. It is concluded that family conflicts are portrayed as aspects of social issues that are conveyed through intonation patterns and constrained by contexts.

Keywords: Contextual constraints, Family conflicts, Intonation, Nollywood film.

Introduction

Intonation, a prosodic feature of speech, plays a crucial role in conveying speaker intentions, emotional states, and relational dynamics. Beyond marking sentence types, it functions as a key pragmatic resource, signalling attitudes, indexing social roles, and structuring interpersonal interaction (e.g., Brazil, 1997; Gussenhoven, 2004; Wells, 2006).

In family discourse, intonation serves as a strategic tool for asserting power, expressing resistance, protesting perceived injustice, and mitigating conflict. As often observed, it is not only what is said but how it is said that carries emotional weight. Intonational choices are shaped by contextual factors such as cultural norms, relational hierarchies, and emotional intensity, which determine their social appropriateness and pragmatic effect. Consequently, intonation can provoke, escalate, or help resolve conflict in family interactions.

Family conflicts are interpersonal or intrapersonal disagreements among family members, such as spouses, parents and children, siblings, and extended kin (Malek, 2013). In Nigeria's communal family structure, where ties extend beyond the nuclear unit, such conflicts often stem from competing values, interests, or power and may escalate into verbal or physical abuse (Edinyang, 2012; Chaulagain & Moras, 2016). The reported rise in spousal separations (Fasakin, 2020) underscores their prevalence. Given their social impact, it is important to examine how intonation operates in such conflicts, particularly in Nollywood films.

Moreover, while Nigerian English (NE) intonation has been well documented in terms of structure and variation, its socio-pragmatic functions, especially in emotionally charged contexts such as family conflict, remain underexplored. Similarly, pragmatic studies on family discourse have largely focused on family values, cultural portrayals, discourse patterns, and issues such as domestic violence, ideology, and gendered communication (Aromona, 2016; Olajimbiri, 2018; Usaini et al., 2017; Chinyelu, 2020; Oladoja & Tomere, 2022). However, little attention has been given to how intonation and pragmatic acts shape family conflict in films.

Therefore, the present study investigates the intonation patterns employed by family members during conflicts as portrayed in Chinwe Eguagu's *Mr & Mrs*. Particular attention is paid to the contextual constraints that influence these choices. The analysis adopts David Brazil's (1975) Discourse Intonation model and Jacob Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Acts theory as its theoretical framework.

Literature Review

a. Family conflicts

Family conflicts arise from interpersonal or intrapersonal disagreements among family members, involving issues between spouses, parents and children, siblings, or extended family (Malek, 2013). In Nigeria, family is communal, with broader ties beyond the nuclear unit (e.g., "our wife" or "our son"). Edinyang (2012) defines family conflict as competition over values, wealth or power, which may escalate to violence. Such conflicts, seen as natural, often arise from differing views or beliefs over matters. It could be in the form of verbal or physical abuse (Chaulagain and Moras, 2016). Fasakin (2020) notes a 14% rise in spousal separations in Nigeria, reflecting increased marital conflict. Due to its debilitating effects on family members and society, it is imperative to further explore the role of intonation during such conflicts, particularly as depicted in Nollywood films.

Nollywood (the Nigerian film industry) offers a rich platform for exploring family conflicts in the African context. As a prolific producer of narratives grounded in local socio-cultural realities, Nollywood portrays a wide range of family and interpersonal conflicts that mirror real-life experiences. As Christine (2016) states, Nollywood films are a vital part of Nigerian culture, reflecting Nigerian societal realities. These films address key social issues, like gender inequality, corruption, and family dynamics, among others, while blending formal and local English varieties, influencing the evolution of Nigerian English. The characters' accents and speech patterns not only showcase linguistic competence but also resonate with viewers' experiences and foster a stronger connection to the films and their messages. This makes them a rich corpus for studying how intonation is contextually shaped and deployed during family conflicts.

b. Nigerian English Intonation

Scholars of Nigerian English (NE) phonology have extensively compared NE intonation to that of Standard British English (SBE), noting significant deviations in pitch patterns, rhythm, and pragmatic use. Influenced by the tonal nature of many indigenous Nigerian languages, NE intonation reflects unique prosodic tendencies, such as narrower pitch ranges, dominant rising tones, and the high-tone marking of content words like nouns and verbs (Cruz-Ferreira, 1989; Jowitt, 1991; Udofor, 2007; Gur, 2001). Studies on NE intonation have examined its features using data from read texts (Atoye, 2005; Akinjobi, 2005), newscasts (Melafa, 2021; Aina & Akinjobi, 2020), and spontaneous speech (Adejuwon, 2022). These studies largely focused on segmental features or acoustic structures, with limited attention to socio-pragmatic functions. While scholars such as Gbadegesin (2018) and Ali (2020) explore intonation's role in expressing attitudes, few address its use in emotionally-charged or conflictual interactions, such as those found in Nollywood family dramas.

A persistent challenge is that NE speakers tend to perceive intonation more easily than they produce it effectively (Atoye, 2005; Akinjobi, 2010). This leads to limited expressive control, with a tendency toward simple rising or falling tones, even in contexts that require more complex contours like fall-rise or rise-fall (Sunday, 2010; Akindele & Oladipupo, 2022). Such limitations affect speakers' ability to convey nuanced social meanings or emotions through tone. Instructional shortcomings further compound the issue. Onwochei (2021) highlights the poor treatment of intonation in Nigerian classrooms, citing inadequate training, outdated methods, and a lack of resources. Scholars like Akindele and Akano (2023) recommend incorporating diverse, digital learning tools to expose learners to more accurate models of intonation in context.

Acoustic studies, including those by Ekpe and Nsikak (2022), confirm the existence of a recognisably Nigerian Standard English intonation marked by alternating but unstable pitch patterns, influenced by native language interference. Despite this growing body of work, a significant gap persists: most analyses are based on read or formal speech, overlooking how intonation functions as a tool for expressing conflict, power, and emotion in everyday interactions.

Similarly, Akindele and Oladipupo (2022) observe a dominant use of simple falling tones even in situations that demand complex contours. Although rising tones appear in polite requests and declarative questions, more intricate patterns, such as fall-rise and rise-fall, are rarely used, reflecting a limited tonal range and underdeveloped pragmatic control. Osisanwo and Odeyemi (2022) report similar findings from their study of Hausa speakers at Bayero University, where rising, falling, and fall-rise patterns were present but inconsistently applied, especially the fall-rise. Therefore, while NE intonation has been well documented in terms of structure and variation, its socio-pragmatic functions, especially in emotionally charged contexts, like family conflict, remain underexplored, leaving opportunity for empirical exploration of how NE speakers use intonation to negotiate power, express frustration, and manage relationships in dynamic, real-life discourse.

c. Context and intonation

Context refers to the complex set of circumstances surrounding communication that shapes language interpretation. Adegbija (1999) defines it as the relevant physical or social setting, time, place, participants, and roles, that is crucial for attaching meaning to utterances. For example, a doctor's request for a female patient to undress in a medical setting is appropriate, whereas the same request by a lecturer in an office may be seen as harassment (Adegbija, 1999). Lyons (1977) views context as a theoretical construct that influences the form and appropriateness of meaning, while Black (2006) emphasises the immediate preceding discourse and participant situation. Sperber and Wilson (1995) expand the scope of context to include broader knowledge (such as scientific, religious and cultural) that affects interpretation. Mey (2001) describes context as a dynamic environment enabling pragmatic interpretation of utterances, encompassing implicature, reference, pragmatic acts, presuppositions, and register. In family interactions, context is vital for meaning, with Odebunmi (2006:22) calling it "the spine of meaning," arguing that word meanings are fully realised only within context. Thus, context both constrains and expands meaning, without which communication becomes ambiguous. Various types of context further aid in the production and interpretation of meaning.

Adegbija (1999) and Osisanwo (2003) identify four main types of contexts: physical, socio-cultural, psychological, and linguistic. Physical context includes

participants, activities, place, and time of the speech event. The socio-cultural context encompasses participants' backgrounds, beliefs, values, culture, and religion. Psychological context relates to the mental states of speakers, while linguistic context involves knowledge of language features like figurative expressions. Mey (2001) broadly defines context as all societally relevant circumstances surrounding language use. Odebunmi (2006) simplifies this into linguistic context (meaning derived from surrounding text (co-text)), and social context, which encompasses socio-cultural, religious and historical factors shared by participants.

Intonation, a crucial suprasegmental feature of spoken language, involves variations in pitch, stress, and rhythm that convey not only linguistic meaning but also pragmatic and emotional nuances. The interpretation of intonation, however, cannot be fully understood without considering the context in which utterances occur. Context provides the situational, cultural and interpersonal framework that shapes how intonational patterns are produced and interpreted. According to Crystal (1969), intonation contributes to the organisation of spoken discourse, signalling attitudes, emotions, and pragmatic functions such as questioning, asserting, or signalling surprise. However, the same intonational contour may carry different meanings, depending on the context, highlighting the interdependence between prosody and situational factors.

Leech (1983) argues that intonation serves pragmatic purposes that rely heavily on contextual information. For example, a rising intonation might indicate a question in one context but politeness or uncertainty in another. Thus, context determines the illocutionary force of an utterance beyond its propositional content. From a sociolinguistic perspective, intonation interacts with social context by reflecting power relations, social roles, and cultural norms. Couper-Kuhlen and Selting (2018) emphasise that prosodic features, including intonation, are part of the interactional work speakers do to negotiate identity, status, and relationships. They show that intonation helps manage turn-taking, convey stance, and index emotions in context-sensitive ways. Mey (2001) expands on this by proposing that context encompasses not only physical and social environments but also cultural knowledge and participants' shared assumptions, all of which influence how intonation is interpreted. The pragmatic force of intonation patterns is thus grounded in this complex contextual web.

Intonation, as a key suprasegmental feature, encodes not only linguistic but also pragmatic and affective meanings through variations in pitch, stress, and rhythm. However, its interpretation is inherently context-dependent. As Crystal (1969) notes, intonation organises discourse and signals attitudes and functions such as questioning or assertion, yet identical contours may yield different meanings across contexts. Similarly, Leech (1983) argues that intonation's pragmatic force relies on contextual cues, with features like rising tone indexing questions, politeness, or uncertainty depending on the situation.

From a sociolinguistic and interactional perspective, intonation also reflects and negotiates social relations. Couper-Kuhlen and Selting (2018) demonstrate that prosody functions as an interactional resource for managing turn-taking, stance, identity, and emotion. In this sense, the meaning and force of intonation emerge from its embedding within a dynamic interplay of physical, social, and cultural contexts. In family interactions, for instance, intonation may signal authority, submission, or emotional intensity, but its meaning hinges on the family members' relationships, cultural expectations, and the specific conflict context (Odebunmi, 2006).

Without contextual grounding, intonational cues could be misinterpreted or lose their intended pragmatic effect. Intonation and context are inseparable in spoken communication. Intonation shapes meaning at the phonological level, while context supplies the pragmatic and social parameters necessitating the choice of tones during interactions. Therefore, this paper investigates the intonation patterns employed by family members during conflicts as portrayed in Chinwe Egwuagu's *Mr & Mrs*. This study pays particular attention to the contextual constraints that influence family members' choice of intonation patterns.

Theoretical framework

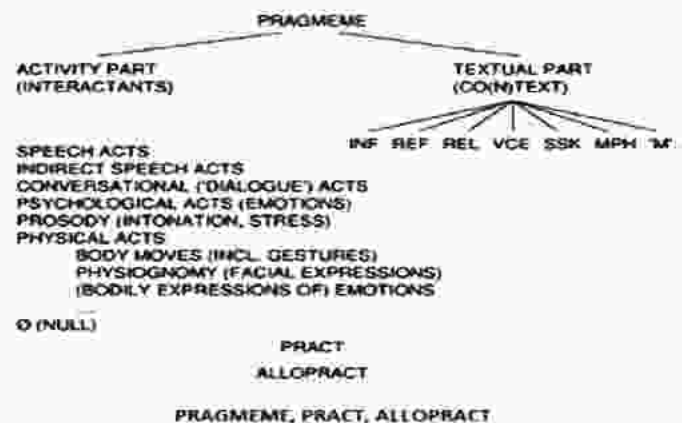
David Brazil's Discourse Intonation (DI) model and Jacob Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Acts Theory (PAT) were adopted as the framework. Discourse Intonation focuses on teaching and analysing everyday speech to improve learners' clarity in English. It explores the link between intonation and communicative intentions. It emphasises analysing speech within its linguistic and situational context, avoiding isolated sentence analysis. The model identifies four key systems in intonation: prominence (prominent/non-

prominent syllables), tone (rise-fall, fall, rise, fall-rise, level), key and termination (high, mid, low) (Brazil, 1997: vii). The DI tone system differentiates between two main tones: fall-rise tones indicate shared information (referring), and fall tones introduce new information (*proclaiming*). Additionally, the key and termination systems, operating at high, mid and low levels to highlight communicative contrasts, additive elements, and varying expectations between speakers.

Type of Tone	Symbol	Meaning	Speaker's Role
Proclaiming (p)	fall?	Unshared information (separateness)	Non-dominant (unmarked)
Proclaiming plus tone (p+)	rise-fall??		dominant (marked)
Referring (r)	fall-rise??	Shared information (togetherness)	Non-dominant (unmarked)
Referring plus tone (r+)	rise?		Dominant (marked)
Level tone	o	formulaic (routine) hesitation	Ritualised or precoded speech

Summary of the types of tones available to speakers in their interactions in DI. Source: (Brazil, 1995:244)

Mey's (2001) PAT builds on Austin's Speech Acts Theory to address its flaws, focusing on the socio-cultural context of communication. It emphasises that meaning is constructed and understood through socio-cultural factors. The theory views communication as a series of "practs" (pragmatic acts), which are actions performed through language to achieve specific goals. Mey argues that speech acts must be understood in context, as individuals are shaped by their social environments. The theory consists of two parts: activity and textual components.



The activity and textual parts of PAT work together to realise the pragmeme. The activity part offers interactants various options, such as speech actions, conversational acts, and prosodic acts, to achieve their goals. The textual part focuses on the context in which the pragmeme operates, considering elements like inference (Inf), reference (Ref), relevance (Rel), voice (Vce), and shared situational knowledge (SSK). In this study, the aspect of textual parts is used to analyse characters' utterances, focusing on contextual cues during conflicts.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive qualitative design. Chinwe Egwuagu's *Mr & Mrs*, an English Nollywood film, was purposively selected due to its vivid portrayal of family conflicts in the Nigerian socio-cultural context, and characters' clear and identifiable intonation patterns which reflect they could be regarded as educated Nigerian speakers of English. The film was downloaded from YouTube. Egwuagu's *Mr & Mrs* portrays gender discrimination and domestic abuse in a patriarchal society, with Kenneth, a chauvinistic businessman, forcing his wife, Susan, a lawyer, into being a full housewife, and mistreating her despite her efforts to please him. This leads to series of conflicts between the couple, together with the in-laws. Virtually, each scene is laid with one conflict or the other.

Five conflict scenes triggered by different situational and socio-cultural contexts were selected, watched repeatedly. The dialogues were transcribed both perceptually (adapting Brazil's (1997) DI model and Crystal and Davy's (1969) conversational analytical notations) and acoustically (using PRAAT), to capture prosodic features such as prominence, loudness, pitch levels, intensity, intonation patterns, interruptions, voice quality, and paralinguistic cues, such as physical and physiognomic acts, which contribute to the interpretation of dialogues. The utterances were segmented into tone units (TUs), with each TU marked by two slant strokes (/ /). DI systems/choices, such as *tones*—referring *r*, which denotes fall-rise tone (RFRT); referring *r+*, which denotes rise tone (RRT); proclaiming *p*, i.e., fall tone (PFT); and proclaiming *p+*, denoting rise-fall tone (PRFT)—as well as *key* and *termination* (high, mid, low), and prominence (loudness/intensity, marked by CAPITALS), were used to analyse the characters' intonation patterns. *Key* marks the beginning of a TU and indicates the pitch level employed, while *termination* marks the lexical item that bears the intonation tune and shows the pitch level used. Both key and termination were marked as either high (→), mid (↑), or low (↓). The data were subjected to phono-pragmatic analysis. Discussions of the pragmatic and

communicative values of the identified intonation patterns were provided, as they relate to, and are constrained by, the contexts of family conflict scenes. The analysis identified the contextual factors influencing the characters' intonational choices, showing how these contexts influence not only what the characters say but also how they say it, and what they intend to achieve through their manner of speech.

Analysis

The contextual factors necessitating the choice of intonation patterns realised in characters' utterances during family conflicts in the film are patriarchal dominance, unmet expectations, gender role assignment, sexual responsibility, and physical and psychological stress.

a. Patriarchal dominance

Within the context of the Nigerian family system, patriarchal dominance reflects a socio-cultural structure where men hold authority and women are relegated to subordinate roles, mainly as caregivers. This contextual belief positions men as natural leaders and decision-makers. In the film *Mr & Mrs*, it becomes a discourse issue of family conflict when male characters deliberately choose their intonation tones and attendant attitudinal cues to assert their patriarchal privileges over female characters during family interactions. Women's resistance to these norms often intensifies conflicts, as seen in Ken and Susan's interactions, where Ken enforces male superiority through speech, while Susan struggles to conform to cultural expectations of female silence and submission as seen below.

1. KEN: //p → I don't GET it// p ↑ I MAKE sure I proVIDE everything we
2. need as a family// p+ ↑ You DON'T WORK// p ↑ WHAT'S so difficult in
3. being a ↑ HOUSE wife// (sighs).
4. SUSAN: //p+ ↑ I TOLD you today has been ↓ VERY hectic// p It's ↓ NOT
5. been ↓ EASY with me//
6. KEN: //p ↑ >>WHAT is THIS! <<//r+ I ↑ MADE it clear this ↑
- MORning//
7. //p+ ↑ MANGO JUICE//
8. SUSAN: //p+ ↓ MANgo (0.2), is a SEAsonal fruit//
9. KEN: //p ↑ I DON'T BLOODY ↑ CARE// p ↑ GET this thing ↑ OFF my
10. table//p ↑ NOW!// (0.2) ↑ NOW!//

Patriarchal dominance structures both the interactional roles and intonation choices in the exchange. Ken's utterances are marked by high- and mid-key proclaiming fall tones (PFT) with strong termination and prominence, “//p → I don't GET it// p ↑ I MAKE sure I proVIDE everything...//”, indexing authority and entitlement grounded in his superior complex. His repeated use of assertive contours, alongside sarcastic proclaiming rise-fall tones “//p+ You ↑ DON'T WORK//”, functions to dismiss Susan's labour and reinforce hierarchical control. His inferential framing of her “failure” to provide mango juice further reflects a patriarchal ego and amplifies male expectations. Prosodically, interruptions, high key/termination (pitch), and intensity operational resources to signal dominance and assert control.

Moreover, Susan's intonation reflects constraint and accommodation within this power structure. Her explanations are deliberately presented through proclaiming fall tones with low/mid key/termination, “//p+ ↑ I TOLD you today has been ↓ VERY hectic//”. This signals mitigation, deference and an orientation to shared socio-cultural expectations (SSK). However, her shift to a low-key proclaiming rise-fall tone, with a brief pause in the tone unit “//p+ ↓ MANgo (0.2), is a SEAsonal fruit//” (line) indicates subtle resistance, and an attempt to recontextualise the issue while still maintaining politeness. Her subdued pitch, reduced intensity, and justificatory stance show how intonation encodes both awareness of subordination and a cautious negotiation of agency. Patriarchal dominance thus systematically shapes intonational behaviour: authority is enacted through high-pitch, emphatic proclamations, while subordination is indexed through lowered pitch and mitigated contours. The interaction demonstrates that prosody becomes a site where gendered power relations are reproduced and contested. Crucially, shared socio-cultural knowledge constrains resistance, making intonation a key resource for negotiating dominance within unequal relational structures.

In another scene, Susan serves Ken breakfast and waits on him at table to eat before going out. Upon tasting the food, Ken drops the fork and knife and asks in a probing or condescending sarcastic tone that implies discontent or disagreement:

1. KEN: //p → When was this moimoi → MADE//r+ Do I have to → reMIND you
2. //p → that KEN → ABAH//r+ → the MANaging → DIrector of Hills Oil and
3. Gas//p → does not eat. → STALE food//

4. SUSAN: //r+ have I →EVER given you →STALE food before//r →Ken//

5. KEN: //p →WHEN was this moi moi →MADE if it's not stale//....

Patriarchal dominance frames both the pragmatic force and intonational realisation of complaint in this exchange. Ken's use of interrogatives (lines 1–3, 5) functions as an indirect complaint strategy, where fall-rise contours (r+) encode scepticism and covert accusation rather than genuine inquiry, subtly positioning Susan as negligent or dishonest. This prosodic pattern reflects an underlying entitlement to evaluate and police her domestic performance. His extended utterance: “//r+ Do I have to →reMIND you////p →that KEN →ABAH//r+ →the MANaging →Director of Hills Oil and Gas//p →does not eat →STALE food//”, combines referring rise with emphatic proclaiming fall tones and heightened prominence to assert status and reinforce hierarchical authority. By invoking his professional identity, he amplifies the complaint into a broader indictment of Susan's failure to meet patriarchal expectations of care and attentiveness, aligning with socio-cultural norms that prioritise male satisfaction.

Susan's response, “//r+ have I →EVER given you →STALE food before //r →Ken//”, produced with mid pitch, constitutes a mitigated defence that indexes both emotional hurt and constrained resistance. Her reliance on rise and fall-rise tones here signals appeal and self-justification rather than confrontation, reflecting an orientation to shared socio-cultural knowledge (SSK) about a Yoruba African cultural philosophy that “*obe ti baale ile kii je, iyale ile kii se*” [a wife must not prepare a delicacy that her husband does not eat] (Adebayo and Bukola, 2024), which discourages any form of disregard for male authority. The asymmetry in their prosodic choices, such as Ken's high-prominence, status-indexing assertions versus Susan's controlled, defensive intonation, reveals how patriarchal dominance shapes not only what is said but how it is said.

Patriarchal authority thus transforms interrogatives into vehicles of control, where fall-rise intonation encodes accusation and entitlement. Ken's prosody reinforces dominance by elevating complaint into status-backed criticism, while Susan's mitigated contours index constrained agency and emotional injury. The interaction shows that intonation functions as a prosodic resource for reproducing and negotiating power in the early stages of family conflict.

b. Unmet expectations

Unmet expectations are a key trigger of family conflicts in the selected film. When hope around roles, affection, or support is unfulfilled, frustration builds,

often leading to conflict. As Odebunmi (2006) notes, socio-cultural and psychological contexts influence how such disappointments are perceived, intensifying misunderstandings. Family members express these frustrations through intonation and pragmatic acts, as illustrated in the following excerpts.

1. KEN: //p ↑ Your NAGging is becoming unBEARable //p ↑ HONestly//

2. SUSAN: //r+ ↑ WAS I LIKE THIS before your father OWNED oil blocks//

3. > > //p ↑ Now //p ↑ let me TAKE you down MEemory lane...//< <

4. KEN: (*cuts in*) > > //No, no now //p ↑ LISTen to me //p ↑ my FATHER has done

5. us a world of GOOD //r+ ↑ the CHILdren go to the BEST school in town//< <

6. SUSAN: (*cuts in*) //p ↑ BOARDing SCHOOL//

7. KEN: //p oh yeah //p ↑ fine //p ↑ GO to the best cities in the world for

8. vaCation //p ↑ LOOK at what we've aCHIEVED //p ↑ WHY are you such

9. an INGRATE Susan //p ↑ WHAT more do you WANT//

10. SUSAN: //p ↑ I WANT TO BE HAPPY, Ken //p ↑ I WANT to be CALLED

11. your WIFE in PUblic //p ↑ not STUCK in the kitchen like a SLAVE // Ken //

12. p ↑ I've LOST my PRIDE //p ↑ I've LOST my self-eSTEEM...//

13. KEN: (*cuts in*) //r ↑ THEN //p ↑ Go FIND it//

14. SUSAN: //p ↑ I WILL, Ken //p ↑ GET REAdy//

15. KEN: //r+ ↑ WHAT did you SAY//

16. SUSAN: //p ↑ By GOD //p ↑ I WILL//

Susan's unfulfilled request for domestic support and her unmet emotional needs (of happiness and recognition) are realised through high-pitched, proclaiming fall tones (PFT) and prominence, as in lines 2 and 10: “//r+ ↑ WAS I LIKE THIS...//”, “//p ↑ I WANT TO BE HAPPY Ken//”, which index frustration, emotional intensity, and a demand for recognition. Her progression from mitigated explanation to emphatic proclamation reflects a shift from suppressed dissatisfaction to overt resistance. In contrast, Ken's responses are marked by high-key, forceful PFTs, turn hijacking, and alternation of proclaiming and referring tones “//p ↑ Your NAGging is becoming unBEARable//”, “//r ↑ THEN //p ↑ Go FIND it//”, which function to dismiss her grievances, assert control, and reframe her complaints as irrational. His deviation to a rise in the wh-question in line 15: “//r+ ↑ WHAT did you SAY//”, further signals heightened affect and challenge, indicating a disruption of normative interactional expectations.

Thus, characters' expectations (which are unmet in this case) are not only thematic but are prosodically enacted: Susan's choice of high pitch and prominence emphasises her expectations in an unmitigated manner, and encodes frustration and the pursuit of autonomy, while Ken reinforces his authority and resistance to change through high pitch, interruptions, and contour shifts. The conflict demonstrates that intonation becomes a primary resource for articulating dissatisfaction and negotiating power. Crucially, escalating unmet expectations recalibrate prosodic choices from mitigation to confrontation, protest and threat, projecting an emergence from subjugation and transforming latent tension into overt conflict.

c. Gender role assignment

Socio-cultural gender role assignments are a major source of family conflict, as tradition, religion, and societal norms define distinct expectations for men and women. Traditionally, men are providers and decision-makers, while women manage the home, care for children, and cook, tasks seen as essential rather than burdensome. In Nigeria, for example, cooking was considered exclusively a wife's duty, and a husband in the kitchen was viewed as inappropriate. Modern shifts toward shared responsibilities, women's participation in the workforce, and the use of domestic help challenge these norms, often provoking conflict in households where men maintain rigid adherence to traditional roles, a dynamic frequently depicted in Nollywood films. In the excerpt below, Ken returns from work, expecting his wife, Susan, to have prepared him food. He is disappointed and becomes angry when he notices that she has not finished preparing the food, the following exchanges ensue:

1. SUSAN: //p+ →HEllo →DARling// r+ HOW was →WORK today// (*picks up his suit from the cushion*) (*Ken takes off his shoes, relaxing on the cushion;*
2. *Susan picks them up*)
3. KEN: //p →Like every other →DAY// (0.5) r+ ↑FOOD is not yet ↑REAdy//
4. SUSAN: // #r →No //p →it will be REAdy in a →seCOND and I'll... #//
5. KEN: (*cuts in*) //p+ ↑Susan//p it's →FRIday// r+ You →KNOW// r+ I have to
6. →EAT//r+ →TAKE a NAP//p before CLUBbing with the →BOYS// (*sighs*)
7. SUSAN: // r+ ↓DARling// p ↓toDAY was ↓VERY hectic// r+ I ↓HAD to do the
8. monthly SHOPping// r+ and then and I ↑HAD to do the ↑LAUNdry...//
9. KEN: (*cuts in*) //p ↑JUST GET my →FOOD// (*paces around in annoyance*)

This scene highlights how gender roles influence and exacerbate the conflict between Ken and Susan. Susan's physical and physiognomic acts of picking up Ken's suit from the cushion, and his shoes, while he relaxes, reflect an internalised cultural master narrative around gendered roles and expectations. Ken's immediate concern upon arriving home is the absence of ready food, “// (0.5) r+ ↑FOOD is not yet ↑REAdy//” (line 4). This reflects the traditional expectation that a wife's primary role is to ensure her husband's comfort and sustenance, even when she has had a demanding day. Susan explains how her day was filled with activities, but this is met with impatience and dismissal from Ken, who paces and repeats his demand for food. This reaction could be interpreted as a demonstration of a socio-cultural bias that suggests that women are expected to be self-sacrificing to maintain the patriarchal structure, prioritising men's leisure and comfort over women's efforts. Ken's plan to eat, nap, and later go clubbing with his friends further illustrates the cultural entitlement afforded to men for leisure.

These traditional gender expectations shape intonational choices of the characters and the conflict's dynamics. Susan predominantly uses soft proclaiming fall tones (PFT) with mid and low pitch, signalling an appeal for empathy. By this, she proclaims an image of cultural rectitude as well as a figure of submergence. On the contrary, Ken repeatedly interrupts with high-pitched referring rise tones (RRT) or proclaiming fall tones (PFT) to assert his needs (eating, napping, and socialising), thereby dismissing her efforts and reinforcing male authority. This interaction shows that prosody is deployed not only to express personal needs but also to enforce socio-cultural norms, with Ken's rigid adherence to domestic hierarchies and Susan's compliance highlighting how intonation mediates power and resistance within the gendered division of labour.

d. Physical and psychological stress

Family conflicts are also triggered by physical and psychological stress, which could be from work, household duties, unmet expectations or past trauma. Stress influences the choice of tones used by family members during conflicts as seen in the excerpt below. The poor management of Ken's fatigue from work and Susan's exhaustion from domestic chores lead to conflict between them as seen in the excerpt below. Susan's emotional outbursts, complaints and shouting reflect her accumulated stress.

1. KEN: *(cuts in)* //p+ ↑ SUSAN//p ↑ it's → FRIday// r+ You → KNOW// r+ I have to
2. →EAT//r+ →TAKE a NAP//p before CLUBbing with the →BOYS// *(sighs)*
3. SUSAN: // r+ →DARling// p →toDAY was →VERY hectic// r+ I →HAD to do
4. the monthly SHOPping// r+ and then and I ↑ HAD to do the ↑ LAUNdry...//
5. KEN: *(cuts in)* //p+ ↑ JUST GET my →FOOD// *(paces around in annoyance)*
6. *(Now at the table)* //p I don't →GET it// p I ↑ MAKE sure I provide everything.
7. we need as a family//p You →DON'T →WORK// p →WHAT'S so difficult in
8. being a →HOUSE wife// *(sighs)*.
9. SUSAN: //p ↑ I TOLD you today has been →VERY hectic// p It's →NOT been
10. →EASy with me//
11. KEN: //p ↑ WHAT is THIS!// //r+ I ↑ MADE it clear this ↑ MORning//
12. p+ ↑ MANGO juice...//
13. SUSAN: //p →MANgo is a →SEAsonal fruit//
14. KEN: //p ↑ I DON'T BLOODY ↑ CARE// p ↑ GET this thing ↑ OFF my table//
15. //p NOW!// (0.2) NOW!// (MM)

The interaction is shaped by both physical and psychological stress, which condition the characters' intonational choices and escalation patterns. Ken's work-related fatigue surfaces in his high-pitched, forceful directives (e.g. “//p ↑ JUST GET my FOOD//”), with increased pitch and loudness indexing impatience and assertion of authority. In contrast, Susan's domestic exhaustion is realised through initially controlled mid-pitch termination (“// r+ → DARling// p →toDAY was →VERY hectic//”), signalling deference and an attempt to maintain relational harmony and respect despite distress.

As her emotional strain intensifies due to lack of recognition from her husband, this mitigated prosody shifts towards more confrontational patterns, as she employs high key and termination (pitch) as a form of protest. Ken's employment of repeated high-pitch imperatives “//p ↑ WHAT is THIS!// //r+ I ↑ MADE it clear this ↑ MORning//p+ ↑ MANGO juice...//” amplify dominance and force, projecting a face-threat. Thus, unacknowledged stress is

interactionally recontextualised into conflict, with prosody functioning as the key medium through which power, frustration, and emotional labour are negotiated.

Physical and psychological stress in interaction systematically conditions prosodic choices beyond the commonly noted tonal interference in Nigerian English. Here, stress differentiates intonational functions: mid termination (pitch) contours are deployed as strategic mitigation to preserve relational harmony and show respect, while high pitch, increased intensity, and repetition index affective escalation and the proclaims authority. Crucially, these patterns show that intonation is not merely a structural or phonological feature but a dynamic resource for negotiation. They also reflect how individuals transform their personal emotional struggles into interactional conflict, thereby reinforcing asymmetrical power relations.

c. Sexual responsibility

Sexual responsibility as a contextual factor in family conflict refers to the expectations and obligations placed on spouses regarding sexual availability, fidelity, and satisfaction within the marriage. In many African cultural settings, sexual responsibility often disproportionately burdens women, who are expected to satisfy their husbands while managing other domestic duties. Women are frequently socialized to believe that sexual satisfaction of their husband is a primary marital duty, which can result in a lack of autonomy over their own bodies, leading to forced sex or sexual coercion within marriage. Susan's reference to herself as Ken's "whore" indicates the sexual responsibilities she has had to fulfil, further complicating her sense of self and worth. Her protests about feeling like a "slave" reflect the cumulative burden of sexual responsibility as seen below.

1. KEN: //p →your ROLE as my wife does not end in the →KITCHEN//p you
2. KNOW//
3. SUSAN: //p →I HAVE to tidy this up in preparation for →TOMORROW//
4. KEN: //r+ →and COME to bed →TIRED//
5. SUSAN: //p →WHY do you →TORMEnt me Ken//p →Your FRIENDS come here
6. every SUNday// p I → feed them// and then// p I'm left with these dirty dishes//
7. KEN: //p but I AM not →compLAINING//

8. SUSAN: //p ↑ But I AM//p I need HELP//
 9. KEN: //r+ ↑ To COOK for ME//r+ ↑ To TAKE care of ME//
 10. SUSAN: //p I'll do the COOKing//p To TIDY up//
 11. KEN: //p ↑ >>WHY do we have to go over this AGAIN just because I...<<://
 12. SUSAN: (*cuts in*) //p ↑ %JUST because I am tired of being a SLAVE in my own
 13. home%//p ↑ %JUST because I am no longer the woman I used to be%//p ↑
 14. %LOOK at me //LOOK at my HAIR//I'm unKEMPT%//p ↑ %We were
 15. NEVER like this, Ken, before your FAMILY...%//
 16. KEN: (*cuts in*) //p ↑ DON'T bring my family into THIS//r+ ↑ You know
 17. ...what...//p ↑ LET'S go to BED//p ↑ you are STILL my WIFE//
 18. SUSAN: //p %And I STILL need to have a WASH%//
 19. KEN: //p and I can HELP with that in the BATHroom// (MM)

Sexual responsibility, as a contextual factor, shapes both the content and prosodic realisation of the conflict. Ken's demands are encoded through assertive, high-pitched directives and proclaiming fall tones in “//p ↑ LET'S go to BED//”, “//p ↑ you are STILL my WIFE//”, which invoke shared cultural assumptions about marital sexual entitlement and reinforce his authority and dominance. In contrast, Susan's resistance is realised through emphatic proclaiming fall tones (p+) and preponderant use of high-pitch constructions: “//p ↑ But I AM//p+ ↑ I need HELP//”, “//p ↑ %JUST because...//”, signalling emotional overload, grievance, and a struggle to renegotiate imposed sexual obligations. Her shift from controlled protest to intensified prosodic prominence reflects the breakdown of mutual alignment, as her unmet physical and emotional needs contest Ken's unilateral expectations.

This aligns with the submission of Baloyi (2009:109) that women are usually seen as sex objects. When a man desires what they possess, he may steal it (rape), persuade them to give it (seduction), rent it (prostitution), or lease or own it over a long period (marriage). Susan is treated in this manner. Sex is considered a socio-cultural duty for a woman, and she is expected to perform this obligatory role regardless of convenience, as seen in Ken's indirect demand: “//p→ your ROLE as my wife does not end in the→ KITCHEN//...//r+ ↑ You know. ...what...//p ↑ LET'S go to BED//p ↑ you are STILL my WIFE//”.

Susan's assertion of her need for a shower “//p ↑ %nd I STILL need to have a WASH%//” (line 17) with a sharp, proclaiming falling tone, high pitch while she still cries, indicates she is not ready to comply with Ken's attempt at dragging her to the bedroom. Susan's complaints and intonational choices reflect her effort to assert her needs and resist control in a strained marriage. The conflict arises from unequal sexual and domestic expectations, as Ken demands intimacy despite Susan's exhaustion. This aligns with Tolorunleke's (2014) finding that unmet sexual needs often trigger marital conflict. In the Nollywood context, neglect of shared sexual responsibility intensifies disputes and shapes how intonation is used for assertions and reiterate a forceful demand during such outbursts. This also confirms earlier findings that men, through the shared knowledge about gendered expectations on women lay heavy demand on their sexual responsibility, such that when women resisted these expectations of them as a “traditional wife,” violence was sometimes used to get them to conform, or otherwise conflict is ensued (Gangoli et al., 2020; Mama, 1989; Thiara & Gill, 2012).

Sexual responsibility thus functions as a prosodic trigger, where entitlement is enacted through dominant high-pitch directives, while resistance is marked by intensified proclaiming fall tones. The interaction shows that intonation mediates the negotiation of sexual agency, transforming private dissatisfaction into overt conflict. Crucially, mismatched expectations reconfigure prosody into a site of power struggle, where obligation and autonomy are discursively contested.

Findings

The paper identifies four key intonation patterns, with a predominant use of proclaiming fall and referring rise (i.e., falling and rising tones, respectively). This affirms the claim that Nigerian speakers of English prefer unidirectional tones (simple falls or rises) over bidirectional tones (complex contours, such as fall-rise or rise-fall), often due to the influence of indigenous Nigerian tone languages (Udofot, 2007; Akindele & Akano, 2023). These tones vary in key/termination (pitch), intensity, and prominence, depending on the context of utterances and the discourse-pragmatic functions they perform. The proclaiming fall tone expresses assertion, while the referring rise tone signals dominance and dissatisfaction. This supports earlier findings that proclaiming (falling) tones introduce new information and assert dominance or independence, whereas referring (rising/fall-rise) tones highlight shared

context, solidarity, and common ground (Odeyemi, 2017), and that Nigerian speakers rely heavily on falling tones for assertion and rises for interactional management (Adejuwon, 2022). Overall, these tones structure conversation by marking information status, managing interaction, and signalling emotional attitudes such as empathy, anger, or politeness.

Although the primary objective of the paper is not to differentiate intonation along gender lines, the findings reflect such distinctions, since the conflicts analysed involve a husband and wife. The analysis shows that high pitch is associated with male speech as a marker of power and dominance, while prominence is systematically used to heighten emotional intensity; these features frequently co-occur with anger and the escalation of conflict. The proclaiming fall tone is predominantly used by the male character to assert control, whereas the female character tends to employ the proclaiming fall-rise tone (PFRT) to signal resistance or hesitation. Falling tones also function in commands, finality, and dismissal, often realising face-threatening acts. The findings further reveal that intonation can override the literal meaning of utterances, making otherwise neutral expressions sound confrontational, sarcastic, or dismissive.

The female character (Susan) frequently employs mitigating contours, particularly through low or mid pitch, reflecting an orientation to shared socio-cultural knowledge (SSK). This supports Coates (2015) empirical submission that women's speech is often cooperative/mitigated, while men's is more assertive. Women often employ more mitigation, hedging, and supportive feedback, while men tend toward directness and control of conversational floor. However, she also shifts to high key and termination, with increased intensity in PFT or RRT, to signal protest against subordination and assert her stance. Intonation further reflects the emotional and psychological states of the characters: for instance, pauses within tone units in Susan's speech function as appeals for empathy, while loudness and prominence index emotions such as anger, frustration, and distress.

Five contextual factors influence intonational choices and pragmatic meaning deployed during family conflicts in the film. This supports Tannen's (1990) work, as cited in Albeshier (2022), showing that men and women exhibit different communicative patterns. These differences extend beyond lexical choices to include tone, intonation, and non-verbal behaviour, and are shaped

by socialisation, cultural norms, and underlying power relations. The factors (patriarchal dominance, unmet expectations, gender role assignments, sexual responsibility, and physical/psychological stress) reflect broader societal norms in Nigerian families, often placing women in subordinate roles and men as superior, and influence the characters' intonation choices. The analysis shows that characters' intonation patterns, deliberately chosen to perform certain pragmatic or discourse acts, are constrained by both immediate situational and broader socio-cultural contexts.

Patriarchal dominance constrains prosody by associating authority with high pitch, strong prominence, and emphatic PFTs, typically used by male characters to assert control, while female speech is marked by low/mid pitch and mitigated contours reflecting deference, respect and orientation to the SSK about male superiority and their own subjugation. Unmet expectations drive a shift from mitigation to confrontation, as seen in Susan's movement from low/mid key/termination (pitch) explanations to high-pitch, prominence, assertive proclamations, while Ken escalates the conflict with sharp directives and interruptions. Physical and psychological stress further shape intonation, with mid-pitch contours indexing restraint and elevated pitch, repetition, and intensity signalling emotional overload, frustration and aggression.

Similarly, sexual responsibility and socio-cultural gender roles reinforce high-pitch assertiveness in male demands and subdued or resistant tones in female responses, reflecting culturally regulated power dynamics. Finally, complaint is realised through interrogative intonation, especially fall-rise contours that encode accusation and dissatisfaction, allowing dominant speakers to criticise indirectly while maintaining control of the interaction. Nawaz (2024) states that the social context in which communication occurs significantly influences gendered language use. Effective conflict management in similar contexts therefore requires attention not only to lexical choices but also to prosodic cues, as these often intensify or soften face-threatening acts. It demonstrates that Nigerian English intonation is contextually adaptive, with pitch, prominence, and contour variations serving pragmatic and interactional functions beyond tonal transfer. Nollywood films provide a rich site for analysing how prosody constructs character identity, social hierarchy, and emotional tension, suggesting that film discourse studies should incorporate detailed prosodic analysis. Future research should extend to diverse genres, real-life conversational data, and

acoustic measurements to further validate and refine understanding of Nigerian English prosody in socio-cultural contexts.

Conclusion

Beyond being linguistic choices, intonation patterns play a crucial role in conveying and understanding meaning during human interactions, particularly in family conflict discourse. In the examined English Nollywood film, family conflicts are portrayed as aspects of social issues that are conveyed through intonation patterns and enhanced by contexts. While intonation patterns significantly influence the escalation or resolution of conflicts, their impact is further conditioned by contextual triggers such as gender norms, marital insecurity and societal expectations. Thus, the paper extends Nigerian English intonation research by demonstrating that prosodic choices are not merely products of tonal transfer but are systematically shaped by socio-cultural context, power relations, and interactional goals. It reveals intonation as a dynamic, meaning-rich resource for enacting dominance, resistance, and emotional labour in family conflict discourse, thereby shifting the focus from structural description to contextualised pragmatic function.

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