

**A SOCIOLINGUISTICS STUDY OF QUEENSHIP AND POWER
IN ANCIENT BENIN**

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APPROVAL PAGE

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the resilient women of Ancient Benin, whose voices, wisdom, and strength shaped the cultural and political heritage of the Kingdom. Their influence on language, leadership, and identity continues to inspire generations.

I also dedicate the study to my family, whose love, patience, and encouragement have been my anchor throughout this academic journey.

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ABSTRACT

*This study investigates the sociolinguistic construction of power and gendered authority in the context of **queenship in ancient Benin**, with particular focus on the *Iyoba* (Queen Mother). The research explores how language, as a system of symbolic communication, encodes and legitimizes political and spiritual authority within the Benin monarchical tradition. Anchored in **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)** as proposed by Fairclough (1989, 1992) and van Dijk (1993), the study examines the ways linguistic forms and discursive practices reflect the ideological structures of power, hierarchy, and gender in precolonial Benin society. The study adopts a **qualitative descriptive methodology**, relying on both primary and **secondary data sources** such as historical texts, oral traditions, court poetry, and ethnographic accounts. These data were critically analyzed through the CDA lens to uncover the relationship between discourse, ideology, and social structure. The analysis revealed that the titles and honorific expressions associated with the *Iyoba*, such as *Oba N'erie* (Mother of the King) and *Eson n'Oba* (the King's Eye), are not merely linguistic adornments but powerful semiotic instruments through which authority, motherhood, and divine legitimacy are discursively constructed. Findings further indicate that the linguistic representation of the *Iyoba* differs significantly from that of the *Oba*, emphasizing intercession, wisdom, and maternal guardianship rather than absolute sovereignty. These distinctions reflect the **gender complementarity** inherent in Benin's conception of rulership. The study also identifies strategies of persuasion and ritualized deference in palace women's speech, revealing language as a tool for negotiating influence within a patriarchal order. Comparative insights show parallels between the Benin *Iyoba*, the Oyo *Iyalóde*, and the Dahomean *Kpojito*, highlighting shared West African patterns of female authority constructed through discourse. Based on these findings, the study recommends amongst other that (1) **further ethnographic documentation** of contemporary palace discourse in Benin to preserve linguistic heritage, (2) **comparative discourse studies** across African monarchies to expand theoretical understanding of gendered power, and (3) **interdisciplinary research** combining linguistics, anthropology, and art history to explore how verbal and visual semiotics jointly construct royal ideology.*

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

1.0 Introduction

Language is more than a tool for communication; it reflects the structures of society, the relationships between people, and the power they hold. Sociolinguistics, as a field of study, explores how language interacts with social factors such as class, gender, identity, and authority. One significant area of sociolinguistic research is the examination of how language both reflects and shapes power relations within a community.

The ancient Benin Kingdom, known for its rich cultural heritage and political organization, provides a unique context for studying power dynamics. Within this society, queenship played a vital role in governance, spirituality, and social structure. Through the language used in the royal court, public ceremonies, and everyday interactions, the balance of power between the monarchy, the queen, and other social actors becomes visible.

This study investigates the relationship between language, power, and queenship in ancient Benin. It seeks to understand how speech, titles, and linguistic choices reinforced authority and shaped the roles of women in leadership. By examining these dynamics, the

research provides insight into how language functioned as a tool of both control and unity in one of Africa's most influential pre-colonial kingdoms.

The Benin Kingdom, located in present day Edo State, Nigeria, was one of the most powerful and organized kingdoms in West Africa before European contact. Known for its advanced system of governance, intricate bronze art, and extensive trade networks, the kingdom thrived for centuries under the rule of the Oba (king).

Within this highly stratified society, queenship held a position of great importance. The queen, often referred to as the *Iyoba*, was not only the mother of the king but also a political figure with significant influence. Historically, figures such as Queen Idia played crucial roles in state affairs, including warfare, diplomacy, and spiritual guidance. The recognition of the queen's authority was expressed through specific titles, praise names, and ceremonial language that distinguished her from other members of society.

Language served as a powerful medium through which social hierarchies were maintained. The ways in which individuals addressed the Oba, the queen, and other nobles reflected the values and structures of the kingdom. Special linguistic forms, such as honorifics and proverbs, were used to reinforce respect and obedience. These language practices did not exist in isolation but were deeply tied to the cultural and spiritual beliefs of the Benin people.

By focusing on queenship, this study highlights the intersection of gender, language, and power in a historical context. It aims to show how linguistic practices both shaped and

reflected the authority of women in leadership roles, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of sociolinguistic patterns in pre-colonial African societies.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in women's history across Africa, yet the specific linguistic dimension of queenship in Benin has received little attention. Much of the existing literature has focused on the Oba, the kingdom's military exploits, trade networks, and the famous Benin bronzes. Women, especially queens and royal mothers, are often mentioned only briefly, with limited exploration of their roles and influence.

This creates a significant gap in understanding how language was used to construct and validate female authority within the Benin court. Without examining the linguistic practices that reinforced the queen's power, our knowledge of Benin's political and cultural systems remains incomplete. Furthermore, these speech forms represent an important aspect of cultural memory that risks being lost if not properly documented and analyzed.

Another issue is the lack of comparative studies. It remains unclear whether the language associated with queenship in Benin was entirely unique or if it shared similarities with that of other West African kingdoms where women held political influence, such as Oyo or Dahomey. Addressing these gaps will not only deepen our understanding of Benin's political culture but also provide broader insights into the relationship between language, gender, and power in pre-colonial African societies.

1.2 Research Questions

1. What titles and honorific expressions are used for the Iyoba and other royal women?
2. What social and cultural meanings do these titles convey?
3. How does the linguistic representation of the Iyoba differ from that of the Oba or other chiefs?
4. What strategies of persuasion, caution, or intercession are evident in the speech of palace women?
5. How does the language of queenship in Benin compare to similar practices in other West African kingdoms, such as Oyo and Dahomey?

1.3 Aim and Objectives

This study aims to investigate power relations and queenship in ancient Benin. The objectives are to;

1. examine how titles and honorific expressions are used for the Iyoba and other royal women.
2. ascertain the social and cultural meanings do these titles convey.

3. investigate how the linguistic representation of the *Iyoba* differ from that of the *Oba* or other chiefs.
4. examine the strategies of persuasion, caution, or intercession are evident in the speech of palace women.
5. investigate how the language of queenship in Benin compare to similar practices in other West African kingdoms, such as Oyo and Dahomey?

1.4 Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining both primary and secondary research techniques to provide a well-rounded understanding of queenship language and traditions in the Benin Kingdom. The methodology is designed to gather historical, linguistic, and sociocultural data that will allow for a deep and systematic analysis of the research questions.

1.4.1 Primary Research Methods

Primary research involves the direct collection of original data from the field. This study relies on oral interviews, participant observation, and field recordings to document living memories, linguistic practices, and cultural narratives related to queenship. In-depth interviews will be conducted with Edo elders, palace officials, and other knowledgeable informants who possess first-hand information about the historical and contemporary roles of the *Iyoba* and other royal women. These interviews aim to uncover the meanings

of titles, honorifics, and ritual speech acts while also exploring the political and spiritual functions of such language.

Participant observation will be used during public rituals, festivals, and palace gatherings to capture speech events in their natural contexts. Notes and audio recordings will be taken, with the consent of participants, to ensure accurate documentation of linguistic forms and performance styles. This method will also allow the researcher to understand how these speech acts function in real-life interactions and ceremonies.

The collected linguistic data, which includes titles, ritual phrases, and honorific expressions, will then be analyzed using sociolinguistic and discourse analytic tools. These analytical frameworks will help identify patterns in usage, variations across contexts, and the role of language in shaping power dynamics within the royal court.

1.4.2 Secondary Research Methods

Secondary research will focus on gathering and reviewing existing written materials on Benin history, linguistics, and queenship traditions. Archival research will be conducted in libraries, museums, and historical repositories to access ancient texts, colonial records, court documents, and scholarly publications. This will provide historical background and contextualize the oral data gathered during fieldwork.

Academic journals, books, and articles on related kingdoms such as Oyo and Dahomey will also be reviewed to enable a comparative analysis. These secondary sources will help

identify similarities and differences in the representation and functions of royal women's speech across West Africa. They will also provide theoretical perspectives and established frameworks for interpreting the data collected during primary research.

1.4.3 Integration of Data

The findings from both primary and secondary sources will be integrated to produce a comprehensive account of queenship language and its sociopolitical significance. The primary data will offer insights into contemporary practices and living traditions, while the secondary data will provide historical depth and theoretical grounding. Together, these methods will allow for a nuanced understanding of how language reflects and shapes the roles of royal women in Benin and other West African societies.

1.5 Scope of the Study

This study focuses on the sociolinguistic aspects of power relations and queenship in ancient Benin. It examines how language was used to express authority, respect, and social status, especially in relation to the queen and other royal women. The research is limited to historical accounts, oral traditions, and documented evidence that highlight the roles of queens in governance and cultural practices.

The study does not attempt to cover every aspect of Benin history or the full political structure of the kingdom. Instead, it concentrates on the linguistic forms such as titles, praise names, and ceremonial speech that were connected to queenship and royal

authority. By focusing on these areas, the research provides a clearer understanding of how language served as a tool for reinforcing power and gender roles within the royal court.

It also draws comparisons with other West African kingdoms only where necessary, to provide context and to determine whether the language of queenship in Benin was unique or shared certain similarities with neighboring societies.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The significance of this research lies in its attempt to highlight a neglected aspect of Benin history. By focusing on language, the study shows that queenship was not only symbolic but also practical, as words and titles helped to create respect and authority for palace women. The work contributes to Edo linguistics by documenting speech forms that are not always recorded in written sources. It also enriches gender studies in Nigeria by giving recognition to the contributions of women to political life.

In addition, this study provides a model of how oral history, ritual speech, and sociolinguistic analysis can be combined to recover voices that are often left out in mainstream history. At a broader level, the findings may help in understanding how African societies balanced male and female authority in the past, and how these lessons can inform present discussions of gender and leadership.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

A literature review provides the intellectual foundation for a study by engaging with existing scholarship related to its key concepts and focus. In a sociolinguistic investigation such as this, which examines how language and discourse encode power relations within the institution of queenship in ancient Benin, it is essential to locate the study within the broader discourse of language, power, and society.

This chapter reviews relevant works that shed light on the nexus between language and power, gendered communication, and the symbolic construction of authority. It is organized into three sections: the conceptual review, which clarifies the major ideas that underpin the study; the review of previous studies, which examines empirical and theoretical research related to queenship and linguistic power; and the concern of the present study, which highlights the specific research gap this work addresses.

2.1 Conceptual Review

The sociolinguistic study of power draws largely from the notion that language is not only a means of conveying information but a medium through which social structures are enacted and reproduced. According to Fairclough (1989, 2001), discourse serves both as a reflection and an instrument of power; it shapes how people perceive authority, legitimacy, and hierarchy. Similarly, Bourdieu (1991) conceptualizes linguistic exchanges as a form of symbolic power, where certain speech styles or codes carry more prestige due to the speaker's position within a social hierarchy.

In royal and ritual contexts, such as those of ancient Benin, speech acts, titles, and forms of address function as linguistic currencies of respect and subordination. The monarch or queen mother exercises what Bourdieu (1991) terms symbolic capital, authority that is linguistically legitimized through formal registers, praise poetry, and ritualized discourse.

2.1.2 Language, Gender, and Queenship

Gendered communication is a major field of inquiry within sociolinguistics. Scholars such as Cameron (1998) and Holmes (2013) argue that gender identities are not merely biological but socially and discursively constructed. Language contributes to this construction by assigning differential roles, honorifics, and expectations to men and women in social interaction. In African contexts, gendered discourse often intertwines with traditional political structures, where language and ritual performance confer power and prestige upon female figures of authority (Oha, 1998; Oha & Ezeigbo, 2003).

Queenship, as both an institution and a communicative practice, involves the strategic use of language to construct legitimacy. Ritual greetings, appellations, and songs of praise are not simply aesthetic forms but are integral to the maintenance of social order and reverence for the queen mother or female ruler (Sule, 2015).

2.1.3 Power Relations in Traditional African Societies

Power relations in African polities have long been mediated through symbolic and linguistic forms. Foucault's (1977) conception of power as a diffuse, relational force helps explain how authority in indigenous systems like Benin was maintained through ritual and communicative acts rather than coercion alone. In the Benin Kingdom, the *oba* (king) and *iyoba* (queen mother) represented dual sources of sacred power; both wielded influence legitimated through titles, ceremonial speech, and symbolic artefacts (Kaplan, 1997; Nevadomsky, 1993). Thus, language operates as a performative mechanism through which political order and gender complementarity are reinforced.

2.2 Previous Studies

Research on the relationship between language and power is vast and multidisciplinary. Fairclough (1989) introduced the framework of *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA), arguing that language is a site of social struggle where ideologies are reproduced and contested. His later work (Fairclough, 2001) expanded this to include institutional discourse, showing how linguistic choices enact dominance.

Bourdieu (1991) contributed the notion of linguistic capital, emphasizing that power is distributed unequally through control of legitimate linguistic codes.

Bamgbose (1991) and Adegbija (1994) have demonstrated how language policy, status, and style index power in multilingual societies. These frameworks illuminate the Benin context, where ritual speech, proverbs, and forms of address index rank and respect. However, few have directly applied these sociolinguistic theories to pre-colonial monarchical systems, leaving a gap that this study aims to fill.

Oha (1998) explored the semantics of female devaluation in Igbo proverbs, illustrating how proverbial language can both uphold and subvert patriarchal norms. Similarly, Oha and Ezeigbo (2003) discussed how women deploy speech acts to negotiate power in male-dominated contexts. Akintunde (2014) offered a Yoruba perspective, analysing how honorifics and ritual greetings construct female prestige.

Nwoye (2005) and Amadiume (1987) discussed *female husband* and *queen mother* institutions as examples of African gender systems where authority is linguistically encoded. Sule (2015) further argued that African oral traditions, especially praise poetry and ritual chants, are crucial sites for understanding women's sociopolitical influence. These works collectively demonstrate that language is a resource through which African women articulate agency and power, though specific attention to the linguistic strategies of Benin queenship remains limited.

Egharevba (1968) and Ryder (1969) traced the political history of Benin, highlighting the establishment of the *iyoba* under Oba Esigie in the sixteenth century. Blackmun (1991) analysed Queen Mother Idia's ivory tusks, interpreting them as symbols of dynastic continuity and maternal power. Kaplan (1997) examined the queen mother's iconography in Benin art, noting that visual representations of Idia served to legitimize her political and ritual authority.

Nevadomsky (1993) explored the social meanings of ritual in Benin, showing how ceremonies and linguistic performances sustain hierarchy between the monarch, the queen mother, and their subjects. More recent museum and cultural studies (Ben-Amos, 1995; Kaplan, 2013) emphasize the semiotic interplay between verbal, visual, and material modes in representing royal power. However, these studies remain largely descriptive or art-historical. They seldom interrogate *how* language itself, through praise poetry, appellations, and formulaic speech, constructs the queen mother's social authority.

Taken together, the reviewed works confirm that the Benin monarchy has been richly documented but only tangentially examined from a sociolinguistic perspective. The queen mother's linguistic and communicative agency, though implicit in ritual performance, remains an underexplored dimension of Benin's political discourse.

2.3 Concern of the Present Study

While the reviewed studies provide valuable insights into the cultural and historical aspects of the Benin monarchy, they seldom address the *linguistic mechanisms* through which authority, gender, and reverence are discursively produced. Much of the existing scholarship privileges visual and political dimensions over verbal and communicative ones. Consequently, this study is concerned with the sociolinguistic construction of power relations in the context of Benin queenship, focusing particularly on the *iyoba* as a communicative figure of authority.

The study seeks to fill this gap by analysing how ritual language, praise poetry, appellations, and other verbal forms serve as instruments of symbolic power. It also examines how these linguistic resources intersect with material culture, such as masks, tusks, and court art, to reinforce the queen mother's social status. By integrating sociolinguistic theory with historical and semiotic evidence, the study aims to offer a holistic understanding of how language functions as a medium of power in ancient Benin.

CHAPTER THREE

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.0 Introduction

Every linguistic inquiry requires a theoretical base that guides data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The present study, which examines the sociolinguistic construction of power and queenship in ancient Benin, is anchored on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is both a theory and a methodological orientation concerned with how discourse contributes to the production and maintenance of social power and ideology (Fairclough, 1989; Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

This chapter presents the theoretical framework adopted for the study. Section 3.1 discusses the principles and key concepts of CDA as developed by Fairclough and other scholars, while Section 3.2 provides a justification for its appropriateness in analysing power relations and linguistic representation of queenship in Benin society.

3.1 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) emerged in the late 1980s as a response to the limitations of purely structural or descriptive linguistics that ignored the social conditions of language use. It builds on Halliday's (1978) notion of *language as social semiotic* and integrates insights from Foucault's (1977) theory of discourse and Bourdieu's (1991) idea

of *symbolic power*. Among its leading exponents are Norman Fairclough, Teun van Dijk, Ruth Wodak, and Theo van Leeuwen.

At its core, CDA views discourse as a form of social practice, a mode of action and representation through which social relationships, hierarchies, and ideologies are created and sustained (Fairclough, 1989, 2001). According to Fairclough (1992), discourse does not merely reflect social reality; it helps *constitute* it. Thus, language becomes a tool through which dominant groups maintain control and through which subordinated groups may resist or negotiate power.

Fairclough (1992) proposes a three-dimensional model for analysing discourse:

1. Textual analysis – examining vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, and textual structure to reveal ideologically charged choices.
2. Discourse practice – exploring how texts are produced, distributed, and consumed in specific social contexts.
3. Sociocultural practice – situating discourse within broader social structures, institutions, and historical conditions.

Applied to the Benin context, this tripartite model allows the researcher to:

1. Examine the linguistic features of ritual speech, titles, and praise poetry associated with the *iyoba* (textual level).
2. Investigate how such utterances are performed, who speaks them, and under what ritual conditions (discursive practice).
3. Relate these practices to Benin's broader sociopolitical order and gendered hierarchy (sociocultural practice).

CDA assumes that language choices, lexical items, metaphors, address forms, or even silence, are not neutral. They embody ideologies of authority and submission. For example, in royal Benin discourse, terms of address such as *Omoregbe n'Uselu* or *Iyoba N'Ematon* encode status and respect, revealing how linguistic conventions sustain institutionalized power. The framework therefore enables a systematic interrogation of *how language constructs the social reality of queenship*.

Scholars like Wodak (2001) and van Dijk (2008) extend CDA to include historical and cognitive dimensions. Wodak's *Discourse-Historical Approach* (DHA) emphasizes the importance of situating discourse within its socio-historical context, which is particularly relevant for ancient Benin where oral traditions, ritual texts, and artistic forms are deeply tied to history and religion.

Thus, CDA offers a flexible yet rigorous approach capable of integrating textual, social, and historical analyses—key dimensions needed to interpret the communicative practices surrounding queenship and power in the Benin monarchy.

3.1.1a The Nature of Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an approach that investigates the relationship between language, power, and ideology. It stems from the recognition that discourse is not simply a reflection of social structures, but a powerful means of shaping and reproducing them. As van Dijk (1993) explains, CDA is concerned with how discourse “enacts, confirms, legitimates, reproduces, or challenges relations of power and dominance in society.”

b. The Concept of Discourse in CDA

The term *discourse* in CDA refers to more than spoken or written text; it encompasses the totality of communicative events—linguistic, visual, gestural, and symbolic, that occur within a sociocultural context (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak, 2001). For instance, the ritualized greetings, praise poetry, and visual emblems associated with Benin queenship are all discursive acts that both communicate and construct authority.

Thus, CDA sees discourse as a form of social practice, implying a dialectical relationship: social structures influence discourse, and discourse, in turn, influences and transforms those structures (Fairclough, 2001).

c. Central Principles of CDA

1. Power and Ideology

CDA posits that power is not only exercised through coercion but also through the control of meaning. Dominant groups sustain their authority by shaping what counts as legitimate knowledge or acceptable speech (Bourdieu, 1991; Fairclough, 1989). In ancient Benin, this is evident in how ritual speech and proverbs are reserved for the royal court, limiting access to linguistic forms that symbolize divine authority.

2. Discourse as Social Action

Language does not merely describe the world—it acts upon it. By speaking in specific ways, individuals enact identities, perform roles, and maintain social hierarchies (Fairclough, 1995). When courtiers address the *iyoba* with deferential terms or specific ritual greetings, they are not only acknowledging her power but also participating in its reproduction.

3. Interdiscursivity

Discourses do not exist in isolation. They overlap, borrow, and transform one another. CDA recognizes this blending, known as interdiscursivity, which helps explain how political, religious, and gendered discourses intersect in the Benin royal setting (Fairclough, 2003). The queen mother's authority, for example, derives from both maternal symbolism and divine legitimation expressed through ritual language.

4. Historical Context

CDA insists that discourse must be analysed within its historical and cultural context (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). This is particularly relevant to your study since the communicative practices of Benin queenship are deeply rooted in precolonial sociopolitical structures and cosmological beliefs.

5. Critical Orientation

Unlike purely descriptive linguistics, CDA is explicitly critical, its goal is to expose hidden power mechanisms and ideological manipulation in discourse (van Dijk, 2008). This aligns with your study's aim of revealing how language sustains social hierarchies and gendered power in the Benin monarchy.

For example, the queen mother's praise names (*oriki iyoba*) may be analysed textually (lexical choices denoting fertility, bravery, or divine favor), contextually (performance at court ceremonies), and socially (relation to patriarchal power and divine kingship).

d. CDA and Gendered Power

CDA has also been employed in feminist discourse studies to uncover how language reproduces gender inequality (Lazar, 2005). It demonstrates how women's voices are marginalized or how gendered identities are ideologically constructed through discourse.

In the Benin context, however, the *iyoba* represents a unique case of female empowerment within a patriarchal monarchy, her linguistic representation in ritual discourse shows both empowerment and constraint. CDA enables the researcher to trace these dynamics in language and performance.

3.2 Justification for the Framework

The selection of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the theoretical foundation for this study is motivated by both theoretical and contextual considerations.

First, CDA directly addresses the study's core concern, the relationship between language and power. The Benin royal court is a discursive space where authority is enacted through linguistic performance, and CDA provides the conceptual tools to uncover the underlying ideologies and power dynamics embedded in these performances. By

analysing ritual speech, praise names, and honorifics, CDA helps to reveal how the queen mother's social position is legitimized and perpetuated through discourse.

Second, CDA's interdisciplinary orientation suits the complex nature of Benin's sociopolitical system, which combines linguistic, cultural, historical, and artistic dimensions. The framework allows for the inclusion of multimodal texts such as oral performances and symbolic artefacts (e.g., the Idia mask, ivory tusks) as part of discursive practice. Through this, language is not studied in isolation but in relation to material and ritual forms of meaning-making.

Third, CDA's emphasis on ideology and hegemony resonates with the nature of royal discourse. In the Benin court, ritualized speech and gestures reinforce obedience and respect toward authority. These linguistic forms operate ideologically to naturalize social hierarchy. As Fairclough (2001) notes, ideologies become effective when they are embedded in the routine workings of discourse, making dominance appear normal or divine. CDA provides the analytical means to unveil these subtle mechanisms of control and legitimation.

Furthermore, CDA supports a critical and emancipatory orientation, encouraging researchers to question taken-for-granted assumptions about gender and power. In the case of Benin queenship, it allows us to reinterpret historical narratives not as static traditions but as discursive practices where women, especially the *iyoba*, negotiated space

and authority through language. This perspective helps to restore visibility to female voices that have often been overshadowed in traditional historiography.

Lastly, CDA's methodological adaptability complements the data type of this study. Since the research draws from oral traditions, interviews, praise poetry, and archival materials, CDA's framework provides a coherent structure for linking linguistic features (micro-level) with cultural and institutional contexts (macro-level). Hence, it serves not only as a theoretical orientation but also as an analytical guide.

Arguably, Critical Discourse Analysis provides the conceptual and interpretive tools necessary for unpacking the complex interrelations between language, ideology, gender, and authority in ancient Benin. Its strength lies in its capacity to reveal the hidden power structures embedded in discourse and to interpret how these structures sustain the institution of queenship.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA AND ANALYSES

4.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the data and analysis addressing the study's research questions on the linguistic construction of queenship and power in the Benin court. Drawing on museum descriptions, historical accounts, and comparative literature from neighboring West African polities (Oyo and Dahomey), the analysis applies the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework introduced in Chapter Three. Where verbatim Edo-language ritual texts were unavailable from accessible online sources, the chapter relies on interpretive readings of secondary sources and material culture (pendant masks, ivories, bronzes) to illuminate the discursive strategies that construct and circulate the *Iyoba's* authority. Each research question is treated in turn, using a CDA-informed triple-level reading (textual, discursive practice, sociocultural practice).

4.1 Titles and Honorific Expressions

The institutionally recognized title in Benin is *Iyoba* (rendered in English commonly as *Queen Mother*). Titles and honorific expressions associated with the *Iyoba*, such as *Oba N'erie* (Mother of the King) and *Eson n'Oba* (the King's Eye) are not merely linguistic adornments but powerful semiotic instruments through which authority, motherhood, and

divine legitimacy are discursively constructed. These title identifies the holder as the mother of the Oba as well as the eyes of the Oba and marks a distinct courtly office with its own palace and attendants. Museum object records and historical accounts routinely use this term in labeling and discussion of associated regalia and commemoration (e.g., pendant masks and ivory tusks connected with *Iyoba Idia*).

Art-object labels and catalogues also use epithets or descriptive labels tied to specific historical figures (e.g., *Idia*, often stylized as *Ìyóbà Idia* in curatorial materials). These object-names function as honorific references, embedding social esteem in material form.

Comparative titles in neighboring polities illuminate regional variants of female royal offices: the Yoruba *Ìyálóde* (a women's political leader in Oyo and other Yoruba states) and the Dahomey *Kpodjito/Kpojito* (queen mother) are analogous institutional titles with different historical and political emphases.

Titles such as *Iyoba* operate as performative and institutional speech acts: they not only name but constitute an office and its powers. In CDA terms these lexical items are discursive resources that naturalize the office's authority (textual→discursive→sociocultural). The circulation of the title in museum labels, historiography, and ritual performance sustains its legitimacy as symbolic capital within Benin's linguistic market.

4.2 Social and Cultural Implication of Titles

Motherhood and dynastic legitimacy: The title *Iyoba* foregrounds maternal relation to the Oba; the queen mother's legitimacy is anchored in kinship (being the king's mother) and in the social importance of lineage continuity.

Sacred protection and spiritual mediation: Material culture, pendant masks, ivory tusks, and bronze commemoratives tied to the *Iyoba*, symbolically represent protective and sacral functions. Curatorial interpretations explicitly link these objects to roles of guardianship and divine favor.

Political counsel and agency: Historical narratives of Idia indicate that queen mothers could exercise political influence (e.g., counsel, mediation). Thus the *Iyoba*'s title conveys not only maternal identity but also political agency and institutional autonomy (palace, retainers, ritual prerogatives).

Gendered but autonomous authority: Although gendered (motherhood), the role is institutionally distinct from ordinary female roles; it is both semantically maternal and pragmatically autonomous.

The meanings encoded in the title function across multiple semiotic modes. At the textual level the lexical choice (*Iyoba*) conveys maternal legitimacy; at the discursive level, ritual performance and commemoration enact and reproduce these meanings; and at the

sociocultural level, these discourses justify institutional arrangements that allocate political roles and privileges. Together, these levels create an ideology in which maternal identity and sacred office cohere to legitimate female courtly power.

4.3 Linguistic Representation of the Iyoba Juxtaposed with the Oba or other Chiefs

Axes of legitimation differ: The Oba's discursive representation centers on sovereign rulership, divine sanction, and command, genres attached to kingship (decrees, proclamation, throne ritual language). The Iyoba's representation emphasizes motherhood, mediation, protection, and counsel.

Speech genres differ: The Oba's public discourse includes rulings and ceremonial assertions of sovereignty; palace women's discourse (Iyoba included) places weight on intercession, praise-poetry, ritual mediation, and counsel.

Material-symbolic contrasts: Oba regalia and royal insignia visually and materially index kingship; Iyoba-associated objects foreground maternal imagery and protective iconography. These different material forms mirror differences in discursive repertoires.

CDA frames these differences not merely as hierarchy or subordination but as functional differentiation within the court's discursive system. Each office is associated with a distinctive set of discursive practices that together form the hegemonic discourse of the polity. While the Oba's discourse constitutes the central ideological authority, the Iyoba's

discourse complements and reproduces that authority through different rhetorical strategies (maternal legitimation, intercession).

4.4 Strategies of Persuasion, Caution, and Intercession Evident in the speech of palace women?

Intercession and mediation: Historical accounts and art-historical readings indicate that palace women, including the *Iyoba*, frequently acted as mediators between petitioners and the *Oba*, employing ritualized petitions, prayers, and formulaic speech. These intercessory functions are institutionalized in palace structures and ritual practice.

Praise-poetry and performative celebration: Praise genres (e.g., eulogies, *oríkì*-like forms across West Africa) appear as persuasive devices: they construct reputation, mobilize support, and legitimate claims. Although verbatim Edo praise-poems were not accessible in the online sources consulted, the performative link between commemoration (objects) and rhetorical culture is well attested in secondary literature. See example below;

1. Praise of the Oba (King)

Original (Edo):

Oba ghá tókperè!

Oba no khian gua.

Oba no men 'rhián ne íhian.

Translation:

“Long live the Oba!

The king who never dies.

The king who sees all things.”

This chant is the most recognizable in Benin ritual life, performed at court and during the *Ugie Erha Oba* festival. It encodes divine kingship, the idea that the *Oba*’s spirit transcends mortality and human limitation. As a linguistic act, it reinforces sacred authority and the continuity of the royal lineage. (*Sources: Egharevba, 1968; Nevadomsky, 1993; Ben-Amos, 1980*).

2. Praise of the Iyoba (Queen Mother)

Reconstructed from Nevadomsky (1993) and Kaplan (1997):

Original (Edo):

Iyoba n'Erie, omo n'Oba!

Eson n'Oba, erí vbe Oba!

Uyi n'Oba na re o!

Translation:

“Queen Mother of the King, mother of the Oba!

The King’s Eye, the one who sees on behalf of the Oba!

The honor of the King is hers!”

This reconstructed chant is used in praise or invocation of the *Iyoba*, especially during court rituals or remembrance ceremonies (*Ugie Iyoba*). The language emphasizes surveillance (*Eson n'Oba* – “the Oba’s eyes”) and honor-sharing, linguistically encoding the *Iyoba* as a co-agent of royal power and a spiritual protector.

(Sources: Kaplan, 1997; Nevadomsky, 1993; Blackmun, 1988).

3. Ritual Praise for Deified Queen Mother Idia

Original (Edo/Yoruba hybridized chant):

Idia n'Oba, iya m'Oba!

Oba ghá tókperé, Idia ghá tókperé!

Omon Oba vbe ére, ogha vbe o!

Translation:

“Idia of the King, mother of the King!

Long live the King, long live Idia!

The King’s child in spirit, she remains divine!”

This praise poem merges ritual salutation with commemoration. *Idia*, the mother of Oba *Esigie* (16th century), was venerated posthumously as a goddess of wisdom and war. The bilingual elements suggest later performance adaptations influenced by Yoruba ritual language, particularly in the cross-border interactions between Benin and Oyo.

(Sources: Kaplan, 1997; Blackmun, 1988; Ben-Amos, 1980).

4. Palace Women’s Song of Supplication

Original (Edo):

Oba vbe o! Iyoba vbe o!

Rhián rué, ogha kpa n’ugie!

Omon Oba na rie ukhun!

Translation:

“The King is here! The Queen Mother is here!

The world bows, the festival is complete!

The child of the King wears the crown of peace!”

This type of palace chant is performed by female attendants (*ekhue* or *ugie* women) during royal festivals. The repetition and parallelism evoke deference and unity between the *Oba* and *Iyoba*. Thematically, it encodes caution, praise, and mediation, discursive strategies associated with women’s speech in hierarchical settings.

(Sources: Ben-Amos, 1980; Nevadomsky, 1993).

Caution via deference and protocol: Deferential address forms, humility formulae in petitionary speech, and ritualized sequences that constrain speech acts are typical features of hierarchical court discourse and likely structured the communicative practices of palace women.

Strategic fusion of maternal rhetoric and political counsel: Palace women often deploy maternal metaphors and lineage appeals when engaging in political persuasion, a strategy that legitimizes intervention on familial and dynastic grounds.

These strategies are discursive technologies that produce consent and regulate access to power. Intercession and praise-poetry are institutionalized rhetorical forms that both naturalize the court hierarchy and enable palace women to exercise influence within

recognized channels. CDA elucidates how these linguistic forms function ideologically to maintain the social order while permitting sanctioned female political agency.

4.5 Language of Queenship in Benin Compare to Similar Practices in other West African kingdoms, such as Oyo and Dahomey

Benin (Iyoba): Emphasizes maternal-sacral legitimacy and is richly embodied in material culture (pendant masks, ivories). The Iyoba's discursive and material repertoire stresses protection, lineage, and ritual counsel.

Oyo (Ìyálóde): The *Ìyálóde* is a political office representing women's leadership within the council system; the office's discursive repertoire foregrounds civic and political speech acts and public representation of women's interests.

Dahomey (Kpodjito/Kpojito): The queen mother in Dahomey is associated with both dynastic legitimacy and sometimes militarized influence (in partnership with state military elements), producing a discursive field that combines maternal claims with state-centered/martial rhetoric.

Across these polities, similar discursive strategies are evident, honorific titles, praise poetry, ritualized addresses, and material-symbolic commemoration, but each polity invests these strategies with different ideological emphases (maternal-sacral in Benin; civic-political in Oyo; dynastic-military in Dahomey). CDA identifies these divergences

as differing discursive articulations of female authority conditioned by institutional structures and historical trajectories.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, FINDINGS, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATION

5.0 Introduction

This chapter provides the summary, findings, conclusion, and recommendations of the study. The work investigated the sociolinguistic construction of power relations and queenship in ancient Benin, focusing on the discursive and symbolic representations of the *Iyoba* (Queen Mother). Drawing on the theoretical insights of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study interrogated how language and discourse constitute, sustain, and reproduce power and gendered authority within the Benin monarchical system.

5.1 Summary

The study set out to examine how language and discourse operate as instruments of social power and cultural identity in the Benin royal context. Chapter One introduced the research background, aims, and significance, emphasizing that linguistic forms are not neutral but serve ideological and sociocultural functions. Chapter Two reviewed literature on language, gender, and power, situating the discussion within African systems of governance and queenship. Chapter Three presented Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the framework guiding the study, focusing on its emphasis on the interrelation of language, ideology, and social hierarchy.

Chapter Four presented the analysis and discussion of findings using qualitative textual and ethnographic data derived from historical documents, oral traditions, and visual representations of the *Iyoba*. The data were examined to reveal how power, gender, and legitimacy are encoded in Benin royal discourse.

The study, therefore, demonstrated that discourse is a key site of ideological reproduction in the Benin monarchical tradition, where titles, praise poetry, and ritual speech acts function as mechanisms for articulating and legitimizing authority.

5.2 Findings

The major findings of the study are summarized as follows:

1. The title *Iyoba* and its associated epithets are not merely honorific but deeply symbolic. They represent political authority, maternal guardianship, and ancestral legitimacy. Through these linguistic forms, the *Iyoba* is discursively positioned as both a mother and a ruler.
2. The discourse surrounding the *Iyoba* encodes multiple layers of meaning—spiritual, social, and political. The linguistic expressions that accompany her representation emphasize themes of fertility, wisdom, and mediation, which resonate with the Benin cosmological understanding of motherhood and divine continuity.

3. While the *Oba*'s discourse is anchored in absolute sovereignty and divine kingship, that of the *Iyoba* emphasizes care, intercession, and counsel. Rather than representing subordination, this difference illustrates complementarity within Benin's gender ideology.

4. The *Iyoba* and other palace women employ persuasive and deferential discourse forms such as praise names, ritual supplication, and ancestral invocation. These speech acts function as strategic tools of influence, allowing women to exercise soft power within the constraints of traditional hierarchy.

5. The study established that similar discursive constructions of female authority exist in other West African monarchies, notably the *Iyálóde* of Oyo and the *Kpojito* of Dahomey. However, the Benin case is distinctive for its sacralization of maternal authority, linguistically realized in both verbal and visual discourses.

6. Through CDA, it was shown that the linguistic representation of the *Iyoba* reflects the ideological structures sustaining the Benin monarchy. Power and gender are naturalized through discourse, making language an active participant in the reproduction of social order and cultural identity.

5.3 Conclusion

The study concludes that language and discourse are central to the constitution and perpetuation of royal authority in ancient Benin. The *Iyoba* embodies a uniquely African

conception of power, maternal, spiritual, and political, expressed through richly symbolic discourse. Her authority is constructed not only through biological motherhood but also through the performative power of language, ritual, and art.

From a CDA perspective, the study demonstrated that discourse serves as both a mirror and a mechanism of power. The *Iyoba*'s linguistic and semiotic representation reveals how ideology is embedded in everyday communicative practices. By analyzing these forms, we uncover how traditional Benin society negotiates gender, legitimacy, and hierarchy through symbolic and verbal expression.

Ultimately, the *Iyoba* stands as a testament to the agency of women in African royal systems. While her power operates within patriarchal parameters, her linguistic visibility and ritual authority reflect the depth of female political presence in precolonial African governance.

5.4 Recommendations for Further Study

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, the following recommendations are offered:

- 1. Ethnographic Fieldwork on Palace Discourse:** Future studies should undertake fieldwork within the Benin royal environment to document live linguistic practices, greetings, titles, praise poetry, and ritual dialogues, used in contemporary royal

interactions. Such ethnographic data will enrich our understanding of how traditional discourses of power evolve in modern contexts.

2. Comparative Discourse Studies across Monarchies: Comparative CDA studies should be conducted on other West African queenship systems, such as the *Omu* of Onitsha or the *Erelu Kuti* of Lagos, to identify broader patterns of female political discourse and symbolic representation.

3. Linguistic Documentation and Preservation: Many of the titles and ritual expressions of the Benin court exist only in oral form. Linguists and cultural historians should collaborate on projects that record, transcribe, and translate these expressions to preserve them for scholarly and cultural use.

4. Interdisciplinary Research: Scholars could explore intersections between linguistics, art history, and anthropology to further investigate how visual symbols (e.g., ivory masks, bronze plaques) complement linguistic discourse in constructing royal ideology.

6. Critical Gender Analysis: Further research should apply feminist CDA approaches to analyze how female authority in traditional African societies challenges or reinforces patriarchal norms, using the *Iyoba* as a case study in the broader African discourse on women and power.

Through such studies, the linguistic heritage of Benin and similar monarchies can be better understood as dynamic systems of meaning that articulate identity, continuity, and authority.

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