

## **Linguistic Study of Gender Inequality in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper, we examine the issue of gender differences in Nigeria as an agency of oppression of females by males, which has stimulated linguistic quest for gender equality in language. This study utilised Lakoffian framework in underpinning the linguistic differences that marked the male-female relationship. The picture that emerges from the analysis suggests that there are serial forms of linguistic denial and manipulations used to silence and dominate Nigerian female folk by their male counterparts. This study indicates that women sometimes acquiesce to this existing patriarchal linguistic hegemony. To this effect, the sought to re-echo the fact that language is a universal possession to which male and female gender should have equal and unlimited access.

### **Introduction**

Among ways by which human beings interact is via the veritable utility of language. Contes (2004), writing about language and gender, states that gender linguistic differences of all kinds fascinate people and, so, it is not surprising that there is a curiosity about the way females and males talk and whether there are linguistic gender differences. In this study, gender, rather than sex, will be discussed. Sex refers to a biological distinction, while gender is used to describe those characteristics of male and female which are socially determined. In order to make distinction between the two sexes, we shall always use male and/or female gender. Linguistic gender differences is like a class and racialized ethnicity, an axis for the organization of inequality, though the way each of the axes work may have their own distinctive features (Fishman, 1990). In other words, language is symbolic.

Gender inequality is a possession by male which shows to when, whether, and how male and female speech is done in similar and different ways (Ortner, 1996). Hence, the quest for linguistic gender equality we find today, especially as it concerns female issues, should not then be seen as an isolated quest of a disgruntled elements of the society seeking avenue be heard and be given relevance (Eyeh, 2008). It is ideal to mention that both male and female have a unique role to play linguistically according to the circumstances of their existence, to ensure balance, unity and continuity (Ibe, 2007). However, in most societies in Nigeria, females have no right of expression. Some assumptions made by early gender scholars were very wrong. Lakoff (1975) saw women's language as the "language of powerlessness" reflects their subordinate place in relation to men. Our cultures and the society in general seem to have made of women subordinates and slaves of men, created to serve them and gratify their desires (Agu, 2009).

According to Iyidobi (2002), the other side of the coin of male domination is female defamation in which the female is more or less an underdog with no rights of linguistic expression and in which womanhood has no honour and dignity. In the light of the above, we must then say that the quest for linguistic gender equality of persons is not an exclusive venture. It is an inclusive human enterprise. In the recent times, greater concerns by females about their affairs and situations have been on the increase.

### **Language and gender**

Language, in this work, can be loosely defined as the arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a given community interact, whereas "gender refers to the traits assigned to a sex – what maleness and femaleness stand for – within different societies and cultures" (Litosseliti, 2006). Language is an inherently social phenomenon and can provide into how men and women approaches their social worlds. However, feminist language is established on the premise that men (males) and women (females) use language differently, and the demarcation informs the two



major theories of gender linguistics – dominance and difference. The dominance theorists posit that in mixed – sex conversations, males are more likely to interrupt than female. Zimmerman and West (1975), in their study concluded that “men deny equal status to women as conversational partners”. Males have been shown to (dominate) talk more than females in settings of conversations. According to Lakoff (1975), in mixed – sex conversations males interrupt females more, with the result that female are less able to complete their turns and end up talking less than their male counterparts. As a result males tend to dominate topics of conversation and women tend to take on the role of listener.

Spender (1980) in Adetunji (2010) furthers Lakoff's position, positing that women were not privileged to define or design language at creation, and so had to learn to be carried along in its use. The difference theory deals with cross-gender communication, the male and female genders are often presented as being two separate cultures. Tannen (1970) highlights this socio-cultural difference, claiming that females and males are trained or brought up from childhood to comply with different conversational styles.

### **Linguistic gender inequality in Nigeria**

In almost all societies, male and female differ in the activities and understandings regarding access to and control over resources, and participating in expressing themselves (Agu, 2009). Gender equality means that women and men enjoy the same status and have equal opportunities for realizing that full human rights and potentials, economic, social and cultural developments, and to benefit from the results. On the contrary, linguistic gender inequality in Nigeria depicts the denial to female of full participation by the male in linguistic discourse. Females in Nigeria, from time to time, negotiate their relatively powerless positions in interaction with males (Eyeh, 2008). More specially, interruptions, turn – constructions, verbosity, and floor management in interactions are seen to be less in grasp of female than male (Cameron, 1998).

Females, according to dominance theorists, are disadvantaged through manipulations of various kinds by males who thought them inferior. Spender (1980) posits that language by nature embodies the structure of male linguistic structure. Female language is considered “lacking, weak, trivial and hesitant – in short, deficient when compared to male's language” (Ugwueze, 2005). Within the dominance paradigm, Nigeria women are either silent or silenced. For example, in most parts of Nigeria, wives are not expected to speak, whenever their husbands are also part of multi-participant conversation (for example, family meeting). And if they would, the wives are expected to, firstly, seek their husbands' consent, either linguistically or paralinguistically.

It is believed that women must keep quiet when they are talking (Ojo-Ade, 2008). Okereke (1998), strongly affirms that women lose their linguistic vocality in mixed – sex dialogues, where ... “vocality refers to the audibility in voicing ones views. In the traditional parlance, Tsaaior (2009) has identified and interpreted the silencing and manipulation of women in the naming practices of the Tiv people as unfair. This translates into a regime of silence and muteness foisted on the female whose linguistic expression becomes silent. In Igbo land, particularly in Ohaozara, Ebonyi State, females are to be seen but not to be heard. Strong decisions are solely taken by the males. In different villages, when the town crier had summoned both males and females together at the village square, females were rarely allowed to participate in speech turns. The patriarchal structure of the village leadership does not recognize females. The presence of the females when at the village square has little or no impact since it is only the opinion of males that are always considered.

Males erroneously believe that females' opinions/ideas are too shallow, and, therefore, should not be expressed at all. If they have any objections/agitations in their minds at the village meeting, they do channel such through their husbands after the meeting at home for action sort. In Urhobo Delta state of Nigeria, the story is the same. Married women are subjected to rigorous and peculiar way of greeting especially to all her in-laws. They are denied of linguistic freedom through patriarchal culture. Similarly in Hausa land, women folk are relegated to the background



linguistically. They are regarded as second-class citizens who should not express their feelings for any reason. Women in Hausa land are subordinates with no linguistic rights. Husbands reserve the cultural and linguistic rights to divorce their wives when it pleases them without any prior information to their wives. Similarly, wives in Yoruba land are linguistically subordinates in their marital homes.

It is considered unethical for a Yoruba woman to address her husband by his first name. The linguistic inequality has made females whether educated or not to be helpless with existing patriarchal position given to women. Ojo-Ade summarized the linguistic inequality in Yoruba thus: "As wives, Yoruba women are expected by socialization to defer to their husbands who are considered their social superiors". More over, in Umualum Ngo, Ngo Okpola LGA of Imo state, the level of linguistic equality on females is basically determined by the males. In village meetings, females are given the privilege (not the right) to linguistically express their feelings in matters open for discussion. The extent of linguistic denial by men is aligned with the common saying that kola nuts are not shown to women. Indeed, a traditional prayer over kola nuts is the linguistic exclusive rights of males. When strong decisions are to be taken, the warning is always being issued that only the males are needed for such. And this, no doubt, culminates to linguistic inequality.

In Nigeria, male-stereotyped language is used to describe applicants in occupational areas. The use of "masculine" gender noun and pronouns (e.g., the applicant – he store-man, cameraman – he) further reinforced the "maleness" of the described applicant (Adetunji, 2010). For instance, one of the mission statements of the Union Bank, one of biggest commercial banks in Nigeria "every worker should do his duty" reflects gender insensitivity, especially when the pronoun "his" is underlined and thus foregrounded. Also, in the print media, there are still instances of the use of male referents.

### **Linguistic panacea for gender inequality in Nigeria**

Language is a human product; it is something, which human beings have made, and which can be modified (Spender, 1980). We can make effort to fabricate possibilities at the periphery of our cultural conditioning and to reconceptualize our reality: we can generate new meanings – and we can validate them (Spender, 1980). If words and expressions that imply that females occupy a "lower space" than males are acceptable, the assumption of inferiority naturally tends to become part of our mindset, hence the need to adjust our language use. In doing this, we should embark on linguistic disruption which will involve experimentation and creativity with the parts of speech. For instance, the word "herstory" to refer to "history" which is not about men, is an example of linguistic disruption: a morphological boundary [history] has been reconstructed to [his] + [story] on semantic grounds.

Eyeh (2008) suggests that such words as man, mankind be used in the alternative as humanity, human beings, men and women, society. Creating a woman – centred language capable of expressing reality from a female perspective is another prominent form of reform. For instance, such reform ranges from creating of new woman –centred meanings for words like "witch", "hag" and neologisms such as "femalestream", "femocrat", graphiemic innovations including "womynm" or "wimin" and "lehrerh" (German), to develop woman- focused discourses and even creating an entirely new language. An example of the latter is the Laadan language created by the science – fiction writer and linguist, Suzette Haden Elgin qtd in Adetunji, 2010). Eyeh (2008), further suggests that words such as "cameraman" and "chairman" should alternatively be changed to "photographer", "Camera operator" and "Chairperson", "Chair", "president", or "presiding officer" respectively.

Also, other words such "forefathers" and "manpower" should have alternatives as "ancestors", "forebears" and "staff", "workforce", "employee", "personnel", "human power" or "human resources". A sentence which runs thus:

(i) Transport will be provided for delegates and their husbands.



Eyeh opines should be used in the alternatives as:

- (i) Transport will be provided for delegates and their spouses.

Other forms of reform suggested by feminist linguists are the use of gender –neutralization. Gender –neutralization involves minimizing or eliminating gender-specific expressions and constructions. It entails that any morphosyntactic or lexical features making human agent nouns and pronouns (or other parts of speech) as masculine or feminine are ‘neutralized’ for gender, especially in generic contexts (Arendt, 1970). Examples for English include the elimination of gender – suffixes of – ess, -ette, -(tr) ix in relation to human agent nouns (e.g. hostess, aviatrix, usherette), the creation of compound nouns involving – person (e.g. chairperson, trade person, and the avoidance of generic ‘he’.

Gender –specific is a strategy used to achieve linguistic gender equality by making the “invisible sex” (in most cases, females) visible in language through systematic and symmetrical marking of gender. Also important in the linguistic gender reforms is the necessity of the change of perspective of the female folk across Nigeria. In all the cultural divide in Nigeria, the level of freedom of linguistic expression is absolutely very low. The female gender are not being accorded or allowed or given the same level playing ground in expressing themselves. To this effect, the female gender should, along side other forms of linguistic reforms being given the equal opportunity of expressing themselves as male gender do. This, no doubt, if taken into consideration, will be to ensure proper linguistic gender equality in Nigeria.

### Conclusion

We have looked at language as a form of possession by male and female genders in a given society like Nigeria. Language is peculiar and quite significant to human beings. But while human employ language or a language, as they interact, linguistic inequality evolve and they are made manifest in the ways the male gender regards the female gender. The manifestations of linguistic gender inequality are in culture, occupation, marriage among other spheres of the society. However, concerted efforts by feminist approach or perspectives about the ways female genders are viewed, described and are allowed expression of their feelings. By creating linguistic gender equality, we are, at the same time, creating a vibrant society rather than a vibrating society where callousness reigns.

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