

GENDER AND LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA: A RELIGIO-CULTURAL APPROACH

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Abstract

Gender refers to the societal differences and relations between men and women which are learned, vary widely among societies, cultures and religious institutions and change overtime. Gender is used to analyze the roles, responsibilities, constraints, opportunities and needs of men and women in all areas on any given social context especially on language. There is gender differences in the discourses of men and women. It is observed that women are more likely to use language to build and maintain relationships, while men are more likely to use language to communicate factual information. Language is an important communication tool in everyday life and an understanding of how language reflects and shapes gender roles can provide valuable insights into the social construction and perception of gender in the religious and cultural settings of the society. Gender roles are learnt. They vary from culture to culture and from religion to religion. In the traditional African societies, the girl child is taught how to talk, sit down, take care of her siblings, sweep and maintain a home, help her mother in the kitchen and other domestic chores. The boy child, on the other hand is taught how to split firewood, keep lawns clean, fish in the river (for the fishing houses) and cultivate crops like yam. In the above learning process, language is used. This is because language is a code whereby ideas about the world are presented through conventional system of arbitrary signals for communication. The condition of activities, tasks and responsibilities are perceived as male or female. This paper discusses Gender and Language in Nigeria: A Religio-cultural Approach. In this article, the researcher clarifies the role of language in gender issues, discusses the nature of gender and explains religion and culture in Nigeria. Qualitative Descriptive method was used. The study made use of the theory of communicative competence propounded by Dell Hymes (1966). The data for this study were gathered from secondary sources which include libraries, published research papers, published books and websites. From the discussion so far, the findings show that men and women use language differently.

Keywords: Gender, Language, Religion, Culture

Introduction

Gender and language are interwoven. The issue of gender has always generated a lot of interests within the society in Nigeria. Gender entails that all human beings both men and women, are free to develop their personal abilities and make choices without any limitation. This choice might be in the area of the way one chooses to speak a language or otherwise. The language spoken by a person tends to condition and influence his or her thoughts because of the language thought nexus. It is recognized that language plays an important role in gender socialization and breaking barriers of cultural and religious prejudice, distrust, especially in a multi-ethnic milieu like Nigeria. Men and women have been part of the religious and cultural settings from inception. These settings have men and women who worked so hard to ensure that language thrives. They use language in other to direct and instruct. Greenberg (1) states, "Language is unique to man, no other species possesses a truly symbolic means of communication and no human society, however simple its material culture, lacks the basic human heritage of a well-developed language". "Language expresses our culture, and it is a rule-governed discrete combinatory

system of electrical activation in a distributed network” (Cook and Seidlhofer, 4). Furthermore, the New Encyclopedia Britannica (Macropedia, 642) defines language as:

...a system of vocal communication that comprises a circumscribed set of noises resulting from movements of certain organs with his (man’s) throat and mouth... by means of these (man) is able to impart information, to express feelings and emotions, to influence the activities of others, and to comport himself with varying degrees of friendliness or hostility towards persons who make use of substantially the same set of noises.

Ndimele (3-4) lists the communication roles of language: it aids in passing information from one person to another, it helps people to express their emotions and feelings, it helps people to establish contact or relationship, it is a means by which behavior and attitude are influenced; It is a tool for controlling or seeking compliance with the forces of nature; it serves as an instrument for effecting a sudden change in the state of affairs in the real world; it helps in the creation of amusement for entertainment. In evaluating these communicative roles, Mbagwu (2007) stipulates, that language is the essence in the existence of man. He emphasizes that there is nothing associated with the life of man that does not engage language. The language we use reflects our gender roles in our cultural and religious settings. This study looks at the language used by men and women and how they differ to reflect their position in the society.

Researchers have noted gender differences in discourse, the way conversations are structured. They often observe that women are more likely to use language to build and maintain relationships (a rapport style), while men are more likely to use language to communicate factual information (a report style). In overall, women do more work to keep conversations going, ask questions to engage others, organize turn-taking, maintain a single topic for longer, and demonstrate sympathy with others by sharing their problems and experiences with them. Men interrupt more often, ask questions to get information, change topics and avoid disclosing their problems. These differences lead to the facetious observations. According to O’Grady and Archibald (477), “it is pointless to share your problems with a man, because he will try to fix them”. Some researchers see gender differences in language as reflecting women’s lack of power in society; some see them as reflecting different cultures of conversation. Popular culture expresses this difference by suggesting that men and women are from different (but presumably equal) planets. In fact, we share not only a planet, but also a speech community. Although many of us speak fairly often with the opposite sex, gender differences in language persist, which suggests that we might use language to perform gender more often. Men use male-associated language to “be a man”. For example, men in our culture have deeper voices than women. This is partly because male vocal cords are longer. Nowadays, we see a move toward a single inclusive form for both men and women: actor for everyone, chair rather than chairman, and flight attendant rather than stewardess. Consequently, some grammarians still insist on ‘he’ as the pronoun of choice when the sex of the person involved is not specified, as with someone or anyone. If anyone wants a good mark, he should study.

Despite the fact that women use language to build and maintain relationships, they are yet discriminated against in all spheres of life. A critical examination would reveal the fact that religious and cultural practices underpin this situation. Culturally, almost every evil occurrence in the society is attributed to women who are often humiliated and held responsible for so many things even when their language is for good. Women all over the world face prejudice, grave discrimination which constitute barriers to their ability to speaking out loud. Men have control of these spheres and have exploited this to their advantage for years. The woman in traditional African society is viewed as one not entitled to speak at all on any setting. The reason for this is not far from the assertion that women are considered items of property and should not be heard. Incidentally, this end up giving the women false hope. For example, on the roads, when driving and something happens, the next thing you will hear is that the car is driven by a woman, at times, it may not be a woman. On one occasion, we were in a bus and incidentally, the man in front of us drove very recklessly, the driver in our bus said that it might be a woman driving the car, and when we all got down to see what was going on, we noticed that the driver in the car was a man and everybody in the vehicle blamed the driver of our bus for what he said. What gave him the audacity to say that is because men feel that every evil occurrence is attributed to women.

Theoretical Studies

This paper adopts the theory of Communication Competence. Communicative competence theory was developed by Dell Hymes in (1966), as a reaction to Noam Chomsky’s (1965) linguistic competence which focused on correctness in grammar; that is, knowing and adhering to the rules of grammar. According to Hymes, having an accurate knowledge of the grammar rules of a language is not enough to make the learner competent in the use of that language for communication. The learner also needs communicative competence which entails knowing what to say, to whom, in what circumstances and how to say it. In other words, communicative competence refers to

the language user's grammatical knowledge of his language and as well as his social knowledge about how and when to use this language to accomplish specific communication goals. Communication competence is also helpful in this study because, it is one who is competent enough in the global English that will be able to allow this language to influence his own language, culture and religious affiliation.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative descriptive design method. This design is considered suitable for this study since it is concerned with the collection of data for the purpose of describing and interpreting existing conditions of practice, beliefs, and attitudes. Utterances and statements credited to researchers constitute data for this study. Books, journals, articles, and internet materials are sources of data for this study.

Purpose of the study

The research clarifies outstanding concepts, discusses the role of language in gender issues, explains the nature of gender and explains religion and culture.

The purpose of the study is to:

1. Clarify the role of language in gender issues
2. Discuss the nature of gender.
3. Discuss religion and culture

Research Questions

1. Does language play any role in gender issues in Nigeria?
2. What is the nature of gender?
3. Is there any connection between culture and religion?

Conceptual Clarification

In order to carry out this study, there is need for conceptual clarification on major terms used in this study as such will give a better understanding and insight of the terms. The terms have been listed in the keywords section.

Gender

Gender refers to the sex of a person or organism or a category of people or organisms. Traditionally, gender has referred to grammatical classifications in languages while sex referred to the biological classifications to which gender is analogous to distinguish sexual ones. Gender is, thus, a cultural concept while sex is a biological one. Sex roles are universal. They are supra-cultural. Such roles include giving birth to children, breast feeding, and others by the females. The men, on the other hand, impregnate the women. All these roles (both male and female) are facilitated by distinctive biological features and are natural. For instance, the women can give birth to babies because of her possession of a vagina. The man can get the woman pregnant because of the penis which he has. Behavioural patterns are also tailored along gender lines. The girl child is trained to see herself as a subordinate in the family. She watches as her mother is left out in family discussions though she may be directly affected. In some areas, the girl watches as her father acquires women as one acquires property. The woman who is seen as a weakling is left to carry out the less prestigious tasks. She is to be seen not heard. Ritzer (458) aptly sums it up this way:

Women's situation then, is centrally that of being used, controlled, subjugated, and oppressed by the men. This pattern of oppression is incorporated in the deepest and most pervasive ways into society's organization, a basic structure of domination most commonly called patriarchy.

Gender has, over the years, portrayed women as the weaker sex. The concept of gender presents the woman as one who is superficial, with interest mainly in fashion, beauty and little love for deep thinking. The marginalization and exclusion of women in almost every sphere for centuries emanate from this development. Gender is mobilized to also take away the voice of women, and their power to be heard. It is the reason females are clamped under a husband or brother in whatever they do. This finally robs the women of some personal rights. Everyone has the right to be treated fairly and to have the opportunity to fulfill their potential, society is more united and peaceful in an equal setting where everyone feels included.

Language

Language is a powerful weapon that is concerned with the use of power (Bolinger, 98, Airelough, 19). Indeed men and women use language as they try to define positions in society. As they struggle for scarce resources, and as "they try to convince others to accept their points of view" (Anifowose, 1), (Adedimeji, 251). The language of gender largely helps men and women to perceive the world and communicate with others. In other words, the goal of gender language is to communicate in any given context. Humans have the gift of creativity in language to capture the uniqueness of each context and language situations. Examining the way people use language in

different social contexts provides a wealth of information about the way language works, as well as about the social relationships in a community and the way people convey and construct aspects of their social identity through languages. “Our language changes to meet the needs of people” (MacCallum, 48). This definition shows that language is not only central to man but also flexible, adaptable, and productive. Language therefore, cuts across the social structure of a people and the study of the people’s language can reliably predict the social situations under which the language is generated.

Religion

The term, religion is conventionally used to refer to a wide variety of systems; theistic as well as non-theistic, monotheistic as well as polytheistic systems. The term also covers such phenomena as mysticisms and other esoteric hierosophies. This wide diversity of reality usually covered by the word religion is responsible for the difficulty “scholars have had in proposing a definition that enjoys universal acceptance” (Ejizu, 6). Etymologically, Cicero (106-43 B. C.) traced the word religion to the Latin verb, *re-ligio, ere* – meaning “to execute painstakingly and by repeated efforts”. Lactantius on the other hand traced its meaning to the verb *re-ligare* – “to tie back (to that which is thought to be the ultimate source)” (Ejizu, 6). The term religion can be said to come from three Latin words: *ligare* (Meaning to bind), *relegere* (meaning to unite, or to link) and *religio* (meaning relationship). Etymologically therefore, the word religion means a relationship, a link established between two persons – the human and the divine (Omogbe, 2-3). The term also means different things in different disciplinary domains. It may mean one thing to the Sociologist, another to the Anthropologist and yet another to the Marxist. It means one thing to the Psychologist and another to the Theologian. To Anthropologist like Ludwig Feuerbach:

religion is nothing more than the worship of human nature. For him, when humankind thinks he is worshipping God, he or she is only worshipping himself/herself. That is his/her own nature which he/she projects outside of himself/herself (30).

A sociologist like Emile Durkheim sees religion as the creation of society. Society, Durkheim claims, creates religion to exercise control over people and mould their minds to be able to direct their thinking (Durkheim, 207-211). Sigmund Freud, the psychoanalyst, takes a psychological perspective to the issue of religion and the concept of God. For him, therefore, “religion is childishness. It is a disease – infantile neurosis. It is now the obsessional neurosis of humanity which must be overcome” (Freud, 147). Karl Marx on his own part attributes the origin and continuing existence of religion to the economic exploitation of the masses in a capitalist system. Religion then, is “the sigh of the oppressed creature, the feeling of a heartless world just as it is the spirit of a spiritless condition”. It is the opium of the people (Marx, 207-208). Theologians like Rossano and St. Augustine trace the origin of religion to the human spirit’s search for its source; the finite searching for the infinite (Rossano, 28).

The researcher uses religion to refer to the experience of the holy and ultimate reality of language. Generally, the experience of the holy evokes a feeling of reverence and awe (*mysterium et fascinosum*). It is basically a world-view. It provides a unified picture of cosmos. This consists of a web of interconnected beliefs and ideas using language. Religion answers basic existential questions raised by humankind. Some of these questions are: why am I here, where am I going to after here? Why do the righteous suffer? Is there life after death? Is the pious loved by the gods because he is pious or is he pious because he is loved by the gods?

Culture

“The culture of a people is the way of life of its members; the collection of ideas and habits which they learn, share and transmit from generation to generation” (Linton, 2). Here culture is seen as a collection of ideas and habits that people share, learn and transmit from generation to generation. Furthermore, culture is a “design for living” held by members of a particular society. Tylor (91) defines culture as including “knowledge, custom, beliefs, values, morals, arts as well as abilities acquired by man as a member of his community. Anthropologically, culture can also be defined as a rational and behavioural model through which a society of people socializes”. Oshitelu (113) quoting Linton (ed.) defines culture as “the sum total of knowledge, habit, attitudes and other variables shared and transmitted by members of a particular society”. Hence, culture captures the activities of human life and its essence within a particular society. Oshitelu (113) quoting Paddington (ed.) opines further that, the culture of a community or society is the sum total of the material and intellectual equipment by which they satisfy their biological and social needs. It is this they adapt to their particular community or society. Kukah (11) opines that, culture is a “tool kit of identities for our survival. Its component units are a common world view, a myth of common ancestry and identity, ethos and a set of rituals which give rhythm to life”. Culture therefore, is like the snail’s shell, to which a snail always reverts when faced with threat. Kukah (11) opines that:

A people’s culture is the universe that incorporates the essence of life expressed in their songs, dance, dress, food, stories and so on. The gamut of life revolved around religion and culture. How we are born, how we live, die and are buried are all functions of our cultures and religious worlds.

Culture, therefore, specifies the uniqueness of one society from the other and man from other living beings. It is important, therefore to note that, “a people’s culture includes their beliefs, rules of behaviour, language, rituals, art and technology, styles of dress, ways of producing and cooking food, religion, and political and economic systems” (Bodley, 91). In essence, the uniqueness of a society is specified in their culture. Culture can therefore be described as the philosophy of life that forms the basis of a society and the principles by which it is expressed in terms of language, worship, communication, creativity, fashion, arts, science, technology and others. In this study, culture is used to mean the total way of life of a people. It includes their gender, language, religious, economic, social and other facets of their life.

The Role of Language in Gender Issues

Language plays a pivotal role in shaping gender issues and perpetuating societal norms regarding gender roles through vocabulary choice, speech patterns, and conversational styles. Language contributes significantly to the construction and reinforcement of gender issues and social roles within culture. It serves as a powerful tool for communication, but its influence extends far beyond mere conveyance of information. By understanding the power of language, we can make conscious choices about the words we use, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable world where individuals feel empowered to express their authentic gender roles.

Vocabulary Choice

One of the most important ways in which language relates to gender is through vocabulary choice. Studies have consistently highlighted differences in the words and phrases used by different genders. For example, certain occupations or activities may be associated more strongly with one gender over another leading to the usage of gender specific terms. This linguistic differentiation not only reflects cultural gender norms but also reinforces them by perpetuating stereotypes about the roles and capabilities of men and women. Consequently, language often includes gender terms that serve to categorize individuals based on their gender roles. For example, we have pronouns such as “he” for men and “she” for female within conversations reinforcing the binary understanding of gender prevalent in many cultures. The absence of gender-neutral pronouns in some languages can further marginalize individuals whose gender do not align with cultural norms.

Speech Patterns

This also plays a crucial role in the relationship between language and gender. People, especially students have shown that men and women exhibit different intonation patterns, speech rates and use of filler words. These differences in speech pattern are often influenced by cultural expectation regarding gender roles. For instance, men may be socialized to speak with greater assertiveness and authority, using a lower pitch and fewer pauses or filler words while women may be encouraged to adopt a more supportive and collaborative communication style, potentially characterized by rising intonation, variations in pitch, and more frequent use of filler words like ‘um’ or ‘like’. It is to be noted that these speech patterns are not fixed or biologically determined. They are learned behaviours that reflect cultural norms. Individuals across the gender spectrum can and do adopt patterns that defy cultural expectations and further demonstrating the dynamic and socially constructed nature of language forms.

Conversation Styles

These styles provide another lens through which to examine the intersection of language and gender. Men and women often engage in conversations differently, this reflects broader cultural norms regarding gender roles. Women are often socialized to prioritize building rapport and fostering connections in their interactions, using language to create intimacy and find common ground. Men, conversely may focus more on asserting dominance and authority, employing language as a tool for competition and conveying expertise. These conversational styles not only reflect existing gender norms but also contribute to their perpetuation by reinforcing stereotypes about the appropriate ways for men and women to communicate. It is crucial to remember that these are generalizations, and individuals can exhibit conversation styles that challenge cultural and religious gender expectations. By becoming aware of how language choices within conversational styles can subtly reinforce or challenge gender norms, we gain a greater understanding of how communication shapes the world around us.

Impact on Social Roles

The relationship between gender and language extends beyond individual interactions to influence broader social roles within a religious culture. By perpetuating stereotypes and reinforcing binary understandings of gender, language can limit the opportunities available to individuals and constrain their ability to express their gender authentically. Moreover, the language used to describe and discuss gender-related issues can shape public perceptions and attitudes, impacting policies and practices that affect individuals lived experiences. Furthermore, Cixous (117) sees language as a “key part of gender difference”. She says

Everything is word, everything is only word... we must grab culture by the word, as it seizes us in its word, in its language... indeed, as soon as we are, we are born into language and language speaks to us, language dictates its law (Cixous qtd. in Haste, 1993).

Cixous believes that language is male-dominated or, as she terms it, phallogocentric. Its form is masculine. Both how things are said and what is said (and written) reflect masculinity and particularly male sexuality. She thinks that male thought and language can be seen as phallic. She complains of the woman who still allows herself to be threatened by the big dick, who's still impressed by the commotion of the phallic stance. According to her, male sexuality, the sexuality of the phallus, has a single focus, the penis, and is directed towards particular goals such as penetration and orgasm. Men have tended to define women in terms of a lack of penis. Most men are afraid of women because they fear castration, and women, lacking a penis, are seen as being like castrated men. However, she believes that, in reality, female sexuality, which she calls *Jouissance*, is much more subtle and varied than male sexuality. Women can find pleasure in different parts of their bodies and can achieve greater pleasure than that offered by the phallus. Women's sexuality and indeed the whole feminine perspective on the world, has been repressed and needs to escape from the repression and express itself openly. She says, women and femininity should:

start speaking, stop saying that she has nothing to say, stop learning in school that women are created to listen, to believe, to make no discoveries. Dare to speak her piece about giving... speak of her pleasure and, God knows, she has something to say about that, so that she gets to unblock a sexuality that's just as much feminine as masculine, 'de-phallogocentrize' the body, relieve man of his phallus, return him to an erogenous field and a libido that isn't stupidity organized round that monument, but appears shifting, diffused, taking on all the others of oneself.

The Nature of Gender

Connell (138) identifies three conventional approaches to gender issues: those which see biological differences between male and female bodies as the cause of differences between women and men. Those which believe that culture determines gender differences so that 'the body is a more or less neutral surface or landscape on which a social symbolism is imprinted' and those which see gender as product of a combination of biological and cultural factors. For him, these three are inadequate. He believes there is plenty of evidence that behavior is not determined by biology. For example, there are cultures in which it is normal for men to engage in homosexuality at some points in the life cycle, and there have been cultures where rape did not exist, or was extremely rare. Connell also rejects cultural determinism, the idea that behavior is entirely shaped by culture. This is because bodies cannot be conceived as blank canvases on which nature can create any type of behavior. He says that "bodies, in their own right as bodies, do matter. They age, get sick, enjoy, engender, and give birth. There is an irreducible bodily dimension in experience and practice, the sweat cannot be excluded". However, Connell does not conclude that biological and cultural factors can be seen as separate but interacting aspects of gender. Rather, the two need to be fused by seeing the body as an active agent in social processes. The body acts within social institutions and social relationship. For example, the institutions surrounding professional masculine sport. But sport is also bodily activity. Therefore, running, throwing, jumping or hitting are symbolic and kinetic, social and bodily, at one and the same time. And these aspects depend on each other. Bodily performance is part of being masculine or feminine. It can enable people to act in gendered ways, or persuade people to reinterpret their own gender.

The following examples from Connell's own field research illustrate these points. He sees bodies as both "objects and agents of practice", and practices of bodies as involved in forming the structures within which bodies are appropriated and defined. Bodies, whether male or female, are as active and integral part of social actions and the construction of gender, and are not separable from the societies in which they live. The researcher sees communicative competence playing a role here because the researchers mentioned have a grammatical knowledge of language use as well as their social knowledge about how and when to use this language to accomplish specific communication goals.

Religion and Culture

There is an interrelation between culture and religion. According to Spiro (65), religion is "an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings". It is believed that religion reinforces the collective conscience. The worship of society strengthens the values and moral beliefs that form the basis of cultural or social life. Religion provides man with greater power to direct human action. By worshipping in the society, people are in effect, recognizing the importance of the social group and their dependence upon it. In this way, religion strengthens the unity of gender and promotes social solidarity. Similarly, as part of the cultural system, religious beliefs give meaning to life; they answer man's questions about himself and the world he lives in. This function of religion is particularly important in relation to the frustrations we face in life like

discrimination, marginalization, and unfaithfulness which threaten to shatter beliefs about the meaning of life and to make human existence meaningless in the cultural terms.

Consequently, some researchers are of the opinion that religion serves the interest of men. For example, Giddens (402) argues that “the Christian religion is a resolutely male affair in its symbolism as well as its hierarchy”. According to him, while Mary, the mother of Jesus, may sometimes be treated as if she had divine qualities, God is the father, a male figure, and Jesus took the human shape of a man. Woman is portrayed as created from a rib from a man. At the same time, Armstrong (402) supports Giddens as he postulates that “none of the major religions has been particularly good to women”. They have usually become male affairs and women have been relegated to a marginal positions. Although women may have made significant advances in many areas of life, their gains in most religions have been very limited. Women continued to be excluded from key roles in many religions and cultures.

Discussion of Findings

From the discussion so far, it is observed that gender and language are interwoven and men and women speak differently in conversations. Similarly, culture and religion see women as weak vessels that are not supposed to be heard but only to be seen. However, gender and language are societal norms.

Recommendations

The study recommends that:

1. Nigerian women in particular should be sensitized on their rights.
2. Females should not be feeling inferior to their male counterpart in terms of holding conversations because the Bible created them equally.
3. Women rights activists should not rest on their oars in ensuring that women are not marginalized or discriminated against culturally and religiously.
4. Men should also change their attitudes towards women this is because they are equal before God.

Conclusion

Gender roles are assigned to males and females. In order to talk about gender, language is seriously used. Without language, gender cannot thrive. While it is true that language is a prerequisite in gender, it is only one who is competent in language that can use it in the issues of gender. It is obvious from the available data that differences exist in conversation between males and females in all spheres of life in Nigeria. This discrimination is deeply rooted in culture and religion. This has also culminated in the unequal distribution of key roles to both gender. It has also bred psychological demeanor and a feeling of inferiority among the women. This paper proposes that women should rise up and take their destinies in their own hands. They should take decisive actions and build confidence in their ability to speak aloud as to be heard. Through vocabulary choice, speech patterns, and conversational styles, language both reflects and reinforces societal norms regarding gender. By recognizing the power of language in shaping perceptions of gender and challenging traditional understandings of gender roles, we can work towards creating more inclusive and equitable societies where individuals are free to express themselves without fear of judgment or discrimination (localizationafrica.com).

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