

MAPPING GENDER DISTINCTIONS THROUGH LANGUAGE USE IN IGBO SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines how language use in Igbo society both reflects and reinforces gender distinctions. Drawing on the Sociolinguistic Ethnography model for analysis, the study explores the roles of proverbs and everyday speech acts in constructing and sustaining gender ideologies. The paper demonstrates how linguistic structures encode asymmetrical gender roles and how these practices normalize and perpetuate patriarchal norms. The study draws on authentic Igbo linguistic data, including proverbs, ethnographic interviews, and textual materials, to highlight both overt and subtle mechanisms of gender differentiation in communication. The findings of the study highlight the role of language in reinforcing gender distinctions that may lead to gender discrimination. The study also reveals how Igbo proverbs not only reflect existing gender relations but also actively transmit cultural expectations across generations, thereby exercising power and upholding dominant ideologies. The research recommends that scholars undertake further studies aimed at promoting advocacy against gender discrimination, female oppression, and normalized misogyny, while also contributing to women's empowerment in Igbo society. The study further serves as a basis for cultural reform and gender-sensitive education, thereby promoting greater equity among genders in Igbo society.

KEYWORDS: Sociolinguistics, Gender Distinctions, Gender Roles, Language Use, Igbo

Introduction

Language serves as a sophisticated semiotic system through which humans' articulate cognitions, ideologies, and affective states (Mailani et al., 2022). Beyond its utility as a communicative instrument, language functions as a social institution that constructs, mirrors, and sustains the cultural ideologies of its host society (Lakoff, 1975; Cameron, 1992). In numerous African contexts, specifically within the Ígbò speech community of southeastern Nigeria, linguistic expression encapsulates profound cultural axioms, particularly those governing gender relations.

The discursive representation of male and female subjects manifested through proverbs, idiomatic expressions, onomastic traditions, and colloquial interactions frequently parallels the overarching gendered expectations of the collective. Crucially, these linguistic conventions do not merely replicate gendered dichotomies; they actively entrench and validate them, thereby bolstering the endurance of patriarchal frameworks.

Sociolinguistics examines the intricate nexus between linguistic behavior and social stratification, focusing on the interplay between language practitioners and the structural environments they inhabit. Correspondingly, Hudson (1980) defines sociolinguistics as the systematic study of language in its social context. Holmes (1996) further posits that the discipline seeks to establish a theoretical framework that provides a motivated account of communal language use and the strategic employment of speech by its users. Within this scholarly paradigm, the present study investigates the mechanisms through which linguistic practices mirror and consolidates gender distinctions in Ígbò society. It scrutinizes the bidirectional relationship between cultural discourse and gendered hierarchies, exploring how subtle linguistic nuances perpetuate traditional gender roles. This inquiry facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the pervasive influence of discourse in social construction and considers the potential for linguistic re-evaluation.

Conceptual Review

Proverb

Globally, proverbs are symbolic expressions of people. Jegede (2008) identifies "proverbs as a dynamic mode of discourse with unique identity". Aesthetically speaking, a proverb may be used to show joy, to mourn, to praise,

to indicate failure or to warn (Bashir and Idris-Amali,2012:495). This study selected five (7) proverbs which were analyzed using Dell Hymes Ethnography Model to demonstrate how they reflect and reinforce gender distinctions in the Igbo society.

Language Use

Language use entails the strategic use of verbal resources to navigate various social settings. This is a central focus of linguistics, as it reveals how speech operates within complex cultural and political landscapes. According to Hymes (1972), language transcends mere grammar; its meaning is fundamentally rooted in social context. Accordingly, this study examines how speakers employ language differently to express and reinforce gender divisions within the Ígbò community.

Gender

According to Thorne et al (1983), the term gender "does not refer to grammatical gender(the system to be found in some language of organizing certain word class into contrasting categories of masculine, feminine, neuter) but referred to social categories based on sex but encompasses behavior, roles and images that, although not biologically determined are regarded by society as appropriate to its male and female members". Gender is a component that is socially learned and acquired. More so, sociolinguistic study of gender shows that variation in the use of language according to gender is intimately connected to socio-cultural patterns which reflect socio-economic and political inequality and male dominance in many societies. Reflecting social status or power difference,

Gender Distinction

Gender distinctions encompass the cultural, social, and linguistic frameworks, roles, expectations, and power hierarchies that differentiate men and women within both traditional and contemporary Ígbò contexts. Igbo linguistic practices serve as a means of gendering social identity and reinforcing gender distinctions. The gender distinction refers to theories of sex and gender that have developed in the past century to disconnect the idea that sex and gender are intrinsically linked to each other (Butler 1990). Expanding on this, Fausto-Sterling (2000) argues that even the biological man-woman binary is frequently a cultural imposition by scientific and medical institutions. Within the Ígbò speech community, these distinctions are manifested through proverbs and speech patterns that construct and perpetuate traditional gender stereotypes. This study investigates how such linguistic practices perform an ideological function, sustaining patriarchal values and legitimizing the power dynamics inherent in a male-dominated society. Ultimately, these gendered linguistic choices do not merely reflect social differences; they actively dictate the roles and authority individuals hold within the community.

Gender Roles

The study discovered that studies on language and gender have long focused on the role of discourse in constructing and upholding social power relations. In response to these gaps, the present study adopts Ethnography Communication Framework theory (1967) to examine the complex ways Igbo proverbs sustain, promote and reinforce gender distinctions and cultural boundaries, which can lead to gender discrimination in Igbo society.

Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the field of gender studies by analyzing male and female language use in Igbo society from a sociolinguistic perspective. By examining how Igbo Proverbs are used to reflect and reinforce gender distinctions, this research offers new insights into the dynamic relationship between language, gender, and societal norms.

Empirical Review

Nwosu (2006) examines power and cultural variation in male and female communication. Oha (1998) utilizes discourse analysis to demonstrate how Ígbò proverbs semantically devalue women, shaping societal perceptions of womanhood and entrenching traditional norms. Nwoye (1992) further identifies these proverbs as discursive tools that establish family hierarchies, where male centered language encodes authority and regulates female conduct. Complementing this, Uchendu (1965) provides anthropological evidence of how Ígbò gender roles dictate status and power. From childhood, individuals internalize these culturally assigned behaviors. While Olonade et al.(2021) highlight the necessity of female roles in societal development, Ebo (2022) argues that marital success depends on both genders fulfilling their specific responsibilities. Collectively, these scholars define gender roles as societal expectations regarding behavior and attitudes based on perceived gender.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes Hymes' (1962, 1964) Ethnography of Communication, specifically the SPEAKING grid, as an analytical tool. Hymes provides a framework that accounts for both individual linguistic variation and social coherence, offering a method to investigate communication within its cultural environment. This sociolinguistic approach merges language analysis with ethnography to explore how speech is shaped by social structures and identities. It requires understanding the participants, setting, and purpose of interaction to reveal how language reproduces social ideologies. Hymes (1989) maintains that speech is inseparable from the sociological factors that define its form and meaning, insisting that linguistic structure and social context must be analyzed as a unified whole.

Research Methodology

The theory of Ethnography of Communication as a theoretical framework for this study is to interpret the proverbs, focusing on gender distinctions, gender discrimination and equity in gendered language, analyze how proverbs serve to maintain, challenge, or negotiate gender distinctions in Igbo society. It provides insight into the situated use of language and its connection to cultural ideologies and social roles. This study adopts a qualitative research. A corpus of Igbo proverbs was gathered through oral interviews, literature reviews, and ethnographic sources such as folktale collections, cultural texts, and community elders. Five (7) proverbs were randomly sampled and analyzed from selected Igbo proverbs, which form the data for this study. The proverbs were specifically collected from Nnégwí communities, including Òtòlò, Urùagù, Ùmùdím, and Nnégwíchí

Data Presentation and Analysis

- i. *Nwátà nwaanyi zùrù tóoro onwe ya child woman train
grow self 3SG*

'A child raised by a woman has no guardian'

This proverb operates on multiple levels of meaning through (Hymes, 1962, 1964) Ethnography of SPEAKING framework. **S (Setting):** Traditional Ígbò domestic or communal forums where maternal care is subordinated to male oversight. **P (Participants):** Elders or cultural custodians addressing younger cohorts, specifically transitioning parents. **E (Ends):** To affirm that nurturing is insufficient without the protective authority traditionally ascribed to males. **A (Act Sequence):** Presenting female led child rearing as a deficit in moral and social capital. **K (Key):** Admonishing and cautionary, lamenting the absence of paternal discipline. **I (Instrumentalities):** Metaphors steeped in patriarchal ideology, equating guardianship exclusively with male control. **N (Norms):** Presupposition that paternal presence is the indispensable foundation for complete socialization. **G (Genre):** A didactic proverb functioning as a linguistic instrument to reify gendered hierarchies. By characterizing a child under sole maternal care as lacking a "guardian," the discourse delegitimizes female autonomy and elevates male authority as a prerequisite for social stability. This linguistic practice reinforces patriarchal family structures, marginalizes female headed households, and identifies women as the primary source of societal deviance. Ultimately, the proverb operates as a powerful tool for maintaining gender distinctions by framing male oversight as an essential moral compass.

- ii. *Ùbòchì nwaanyi mụrù nwokè kà ọ mụrù ònyè kàriri ya
day woman bear.PST man than 3SG bear.PST person surpass 3SG*

'The day a woman births a son is the day that she births the one greater than her'

S (Setting): Communal celebrations or domestic counseling sessions where elders act as curators of cultural heritage. **P (Participants):** Cultural custodians addressing an audience of women and younger generations who are being socialized into traditional status hierarchies. **E (Ends):** To validate son bearing as the production of a successor whose social and symbolic status surpasses that of the mother. **A (Act Sequence):** Linking the biological event of birth to an immediate shift in identity, tethering a woman's worth to her son's future trajectory. **K (Key):** Authoritative and legitimizing, presenting gender inequality as indisputable ancestral wisdom. **I (Instrumentalities):** Discursive tools that transform celebratory speech into a mechanism for maintaining patriarchal stratification. **N (Norms):** The social assumption that the male figure is inherently superior from birth, relegating the woman to a vessel for male legacy. **G (Genre):** A cultural speech act that sidelines female identity outside of reproductive utility. This proverb encodes a rigid hierarchy where a woman's value originates from birthing a male rather than from personal agency or achievement. By ranking male children above their mothers, the discourse reinforces male dominance and renders daughters symbolically invisible. Consequently, these proverbs serve as reproductive agents for patriarchal structures within Ígbò society.

iii. *Mà nwaanyi jì ụmụakà mà ò jìghị, ò gbochighị ya ịgbụ dí ya.*

CONJ woman have children conj 3SG haveNEG 3SG stop.NEG3SGkill husband 3SG

'A woman would kill her husband, irrespective of having children with him or not.' **S (Setting):** Intimate familial or communal forums focused on admonition and the enforcement of marital standards. **P (Participants):** Experienced elders exercising linguistic authority to warn against female agency that transgresses cultural boundaries. **E (Ends):** A cautionary speech act designed to instill suspicion and emphasize the necessity of male vigilance within marriage. **A (Act Sequence):** An unambiguous assertion that maternal status does not mitigate the perceived threat of a woman who lacks submission. **K (Key):** Severe and hyperbolic, utilizing fear as a mechanism for behavioral compliance. **I (Instrumentalities):** Vivid imagery and dramatic discourse that frame deviation from submissiveness as potentially lethal. **N (Norms):** A gendered moral narrative that normalizes distrust of women and reinforces the requirement for male dominance. **G (Genre):** A patriarchal discourse that portrays women as emotionally detached threats, delegitimizing female intent to maintain power asymmetry. By portraying women as inherently dangerous even within the context of shared parenthood, this proverb justifies emotional detachment and systemic control. It functions as a linguistic tool to normalize male oversight and discourage emotional vulnerability, thereby sustaining patriarchal order.

iv. *Ugwù nwaanyi bu di ya*

Honour woman be husband 3SG

'Woman honour or prestige is her husband' This proverb encapsulates how female identity and social status are subordinated to a man's presence in Igbo society. **S (Setting):** The setting for this expression is typically found in contexts where marriage and social ties are discussed during family gatherings, traditional ceremonies, and elder-led consultations. **P (Participants):** The participants in these interactions are often older men who use such maxims to inculcate a sense of duty and containment in women, as well as younger members absorbing the prescribed values. **E (Ends):** The end of the communicative act is to cement the idea that a woman's worth is measured by her association with her husband rather than by her accomplishments or intrinsic qualities. **A (Act):** The act sequence unfolds implicitly in everyday life: from the moment of marriage onward, the woman is evaluated to her husband's status and conduct. **K (Key):** The key is resolutely normative, with an underlying expectation of loyalty and dependence, setting the tone for the categorization of women as accessories to male power. **I (Instrument):** Instrumentalities such as metaphor and synecdoche are employed here "husband" is not merely a relational term but stands in for a whole system of social validation and economic stability. **N (Norms):** The norms function to preserve a system of gendered hierarchies; the proverb asserts that any deviation by a woman from this alignment would disrupt the delicate balance of communal respectability and social order. It also reflects the normative pressure on women to marry and "belong" to a man. **G:(Genre):** This proverb reflects deep patriarchal values in Igbo society. This proverb functions as a powerful discursive tool that enforces gender inequality.

v. *Ágbogho mejùrù, ò tinyè iké n'úsékwù.*

girl full NEG put strength in-kitchen

'After all is said and done, a lady must enter the kitchen'

S (Setting): Formal and informal forums such as traditional ceremonies, family gatherings, and elder led consultations regarding marriage. **P (Participants):** Older male custodians of culture who utilize these maxims to socialize women into roles of containment and loyalty. **E (Ends):** To establish marital association as the primary metric of female worth, eclipsing personal achievement or intrinsic value. **A (Act Sequence):** An implicit evaluative process starting at marriage, where a woman's social standing is tethered to her husband's conduct and status. **K (Key):** Normative and restrictive, emphasizing a tone of dependence and characterizing women as accessories to male authority. **I (Instrumentalities):** Strategic use of metaphor and synecdoche where the term "husband" represents an entire system of social validation and economic security. **N (Norms):** The preservation of gendered hierarchies, suggesting that female autonomy threatens communal respectability and social order. **G (Genre):** A discursive tool for enforcing gender inequality by making female dignity conditional on male presence. The proverb upholds gendered, distinctive roles in Igbo society and encodes a patriarchal ideology where a woman's accomplishments are secondary to her obedience to traditional roles.

vi. *Nwanyị makalia dí ya n'uzo, ihé chere dí ya ewere ya.*

woman hurry husband 3SG earlier, thing meet husband 3SG take 3SG

'If a woman is ahead of her husband, whatever awaits him will befall her'

S (Setting): Communal interactions and familial discourse focused on demarcating the boundaries of domestic authority. **P (Participants):** Elder family members serving as cultural instructors who transmit the rigid expectations of gender politics to younger generations. **E (Ends):** To deter women from attaining social, economic, or personal milestones that eclipse those of their husbands. **A (Act Sequence):** A discursive trajectory where female advancement is framed as a precursor to inevitable personal and social ruin. **K (Key):** Stern and foreboding, utilizing an atmosphere of intimidation to mandate submission. **I (Instrumentalities):** Causative language that naturalizes the link between female ambition and catastrophe, framing patriarchal limits as protective. **N (Norms):** Ideological axioms that equate social stability with male dominance and characterize female initiative as a disruption of the natural order. **G (Genre):** A moralizing maxim that fuses femininity with fear, presenting the consequences of challenging male hierarchy as an immutable cultural truth. This proverb functions as a mechanism of social control, effectively limiting females from leadership and framing it as rebellion. By encoding these power asymmetries into traditional speech, the discourse reinforces a worldview where a woman's role is strictly limited to followership, thereby preserving the patriarchal status quo.

vii. Nwaanyi karia 'onye muru?', a juba ya 'onye na-alu?'

child girl stay.exceed 3SG birth, 3SG ask whose wife?

'If a lady outgrows the question 'Who is your father?' she is pressured to answer 'Who is your husband?'

The proverb pressures women into marriage, subtly presenting unmarried status as socially suspicious or incomplete. It also reinforces the patriarchal system, where male presence legitimizes female existence and dependence on male figure. **S (Setting):** Typical environments of familial discourse or traditional counseling sessions within the Ígbò community. **P (Participants):** Cultural elders and communal figures who utilize oral traditions to direct the trajectory of female social development. **E (Ends):** To emphasize that marital association remains the definitive metric of a woman's identity, irrespective of personal growth or professional achievement. **A (Act Sequence):** A discursive shift where a woman's identity transitions from paternal oversight to spousal definition, ensuring her status is never self-determined. **K (Key):** Unyielding and deterministic, employing rhetoric that reduces the female self to a series of relational statuses rather than an intrinsic individual. **I (Instrumentalities):** The strategic rhetorical transition from paternal to marital nomenclature to symbolize the obligatory transfer of social guardianship. **N (Norms):** The sociocultural axiom that female existence is only intelligible through male affiliation, categorizing any deviation as a social failure. **G (Genre):** A gendered maxim that denies individual agency by framing a woman's life as a transition toward marriage rather than personal fulfillment. This proverb functions as a mechanism of social pressure, painting unmarried status as incomplete or suspicious. By mandating that male presence legitimizes female existence, the discourse reinforces a patriarchal structure where women are perpetually subordinated. Ultimately, the proverb portrays how language use in the society entrenches gender distinctions by making female identity entirely contingent upon male validation.

Discussion on Findings

The above analysis, guided by Hymes's (1974) *Ethnography of Communication*, reveals that Igbo proverbs serve as powerful vehicles for enacting and reinforcing gendered power dynamics in traditional society. The sociolinguistic analysis of language use in Igbo society reveals a deeply entrenched pattern of gender distinctions that are reflected, constructed, and perpetuated through everyday speech practices, particularly in proverbs, and gender-specific communicative norms. The finding of this study is the gendered structuring of identity through language. Proverb such as "Nwaanyi karia 'onye muru', a juba ya 'onye ga alu?' (If a lady outgrows the question 'Who is your father?', she is pressured to answer 'Who is your husband?') illustrate that a woman's identity is rarely constructed independently. Instead, it is relational which was defined first by her father and later by her husband. This supports the sociolinguistic observation that in patriarchal cultures, language often functions to diminish individual female agency and toprioritize male authority as a normative reference. Across the data, it becomes evident that Igbo proverbs and linguistic practices do not merely reflect existing gender relations rather they actively transmit cultural expectations across generations to perform social roles, exercise power, and uphold ideologies.

Summary

This study examines how language use in Igbo society reflects and reinforces gender distinctions, using a sociolinguistic lens to explore proverbial expressions, speech norms, and communicative practices. Through a focused analysis of selected Igbo proverbs and culturally embedded speech acts, the research demonstrated that language is not merely a passive reflection of social reality, but an active participant in the construction and perpetuation of gender ideologies. Drawing from the theoretical insights of Dell Hymes' *Ethnography of Communication* and sociolinguistic theories on language and gender, the study showed that Igbo language use systematically encodes and transmits patriarchal values. These linguistic forms reinforce the notion that male authority is natural and desirable, while female identity is derivative and dependent. The findings demonstrate that language in Igbo society is a mirror and a mechanism: a mirror reflecting entrenched gender distinctions and a mechanism reinforcing them. Through repeated proverbial usage and culturally sanctioned speech patterns, Igbo society continuously reaffirms a gendered order in which men are positioned as leaders, decision-makers, and protectors, and women are framed as dependents, nurturers, and subordinates.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this sociolinguistic analysis confirms that gender distinctions are linguistically institutionalized within Igbo society. Proverbial expressions and speech forms do not merely articulate deep-seated assumptions about gender roles; they also actively entrench such assumptions through everyday discourse. Recognizing language as a primary site for the construction and performance of gender ideology clarifies that achieving gender equity requires more than social or political reform. Rather, it demands a deliberate re-evaluation of the discursive practices that sustain and reproduce these inequalities.

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