

## **LANGUAGE GENDERING: CHALLENGES ON THE MODERN WOMAN'S SOCIAL CAPACITY**

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### **Abstract**

*Globalization in our world today has become a catalyst for global consciousness in formal and organized social life. It has worked to influence and alter several world views and order. One area that has not experienced much change is that of language gendering in social discourse. Many gender-related words are used in linguistic interactions to oppress women and subordinate their interests to those of men. This study examined the various issues surrounding gendered language in the Nigerian English speaking community. The methodology for the study was the survey method of structured questionnaire, used to capture the views of women on gendered language. The Halliday Functional Grammar Analysis was used to identify and analyze some lexico-grammatical structures of some gendered language use. The findings revealed that gendered or sexist language exists in our communities, and such language behavior engenders sexist and gender discrimination against woman. The paper suggests that researchers in "gender-language interface", should carry out more works on language and gender as regards their interactions in socio-cultural context, and try to develop more gender-neutral, gender-appropriate linguistic vocabularies and structures that are not suggestive of gendered identities that define linguistic forms and practices as "men's language" and "women's language".*

**Keywords:** General/sexist language, globalization, gender inequality, labeling, masculinity, femininity, "Gender-language interface".

## **Introduction**

In today's 21<sup>st</sup> century, globalization and modernization have impacted technological communities in various aspects of life. One area that has not experienced much change is that of gender. Sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists have so far paid little or no attention to communication interface between globalization and language gendering. Right from creation, as recorded in the Christian Bible, man has always been put in charge of affairs. Even when the woman appeared on the scene, she was made to be a helpmate to the man; having been created from one of the ribs of man (Maxwell, 2002). Ever since, the status of woman has remained the same. The term "man" is still a generic word that represents both the male and female gender. Ogunsiji (2004) has stated that many feminist observers have seen the interest of women as being subordinated to those of men. This group asserts that women capacities have been underrated, and their desire for autonomy had been frustrated, even their sexuality at one time or the other had been either denied or exploited. In the area of language, there are definite differences that distinguish the male from the female sex; some of them signalling oppression and subjugation of women.

### **Gendered language**

Gendered or sexist language has been defined as a symbolic device that limits the activities of one sex, but not those same activities of the other; thus reinforcing and spreading sex role stereotypes, and complimenting the existence of sexism in the society. Some feminists view sexist language as the use of language or words that disrespect women. Such language focuses on negative portrayal of women. It is quite surprising that in our 21<sup>st</sup> century age of globalization, when every endeavor is changing rapidly with scientific and technological innovation, language is still a catalytic tool for gender discrimination and oppression. Dutta(2016) notes that today when globalization is the buzz word, with the growth of

global consciousness impacting expansion of global linkages and organization of social life, works by researchers on “gender-language” interface have been quite slow. However, some sociolinguists are beginning to recognize that globalization as a phenomenon has implications for patterning of language use and linguistic variation and change, even though evidence still copiously exists to show that every language inherently harbours expressions that are pointers to differential treatment of women by society which resonates negatively. The aim of this paper is therefore to investigate society’s bias against women as regards gendered linguistic practices.

### **Theoretical Approaches on Gender-Language Interface**

Lakoff (1975) postulates that language itself is a tool of coercion in a patriarchal society and is internalized as part of learning to be a woman; and this is imposed on women by societal norms; and in turn keeps women in their place. According to Lakoff, woman’s language is rife with certain devices and mitigators, for example, “I think, probably, kind of, hopefully, etc.” Such language renders woman’s speech tentative and not firmly established and expressed as that of men; thereby rendering women’s speech powerless and trivial and as such disqualifies them from positions of power and authority. Kress (1989) observes that men tend to adopt the subject position in their discourse, and this subject position is constructed for them as sexist discourse. Such discourse includes assertive, confident and blunt discourse in a genre that is regarded as a sign of power. Thus by mere consideration of how language is used by men and women in discourse, it is easy to discern where power and authority is established.

There are essentially two different approaches to the study of the differences in women and men’s speech. They are the difference approach and the dominance approach. Proponents of the difference approach propose that women and men belong to different subcultures, and both speak differently because of

fundamental differences in their relation to their language, and this may be due to socialization and early experiences. The other approach, the dominance approach views women as an oppressed group and interprets linguistic differences in women and men's speech in terms of men's dominance and women's subjugation or subordination. In the view of Poynton (1989) there are ideological reasons for language practices that keep women alienated from power. Some feminist-psychoanalysts have argued that history and culture are written in patriarchal language and centered on men. This study however, takes its position from the dominance approach.

### **Methodology**

The study employed two models of analysis: first, the survey method of structured questionnaire was adopted. The objective of the questionnaire was to capture the views of the women on gender language in their communities. A total of 100 questionnaires were distributed to women of various social classes, and they were required to provide honest and unbiased responses to the questions. They were assured that their responses would remain confidential. At the end, the responses were captured as percentile of the total respondents.

The Halliday (1990) Functional Grammar Analysis was used to analyze the Lexico-grammatical structures of some identified gendered linguistic elements. The analysis was undertaken under the purview of English as the lingua-franca of Nigeria.

### **Findings**

A total of 100 copies of the questionnaire were distributed. Out of this number 83 were appropriately filled in, while 17 questionnaires were returned blank and these were discarded.

S/ N	Gender Language and its Challenges on the Modern Woman	Response and Percentage of Respondents		
	Issues	Yes	No	Not Quite Sure
1.	Are you aware of certain words and expressions that are humiliating and insulting to women?	75	4	4
2.	As a lady, do you feel discriminated against when certain negative language forms are directed at you?	71	10	2
3.	In your view, does gendered language promote gender inequality?	46	29	8
4.	Would you like a continued promotion of "women's language" and "men's language" in your social clique?	39	38	6
5.	Do you agree that gendered language puts women in a subordinate position in the society?	60	20	3
6.	Do think that gendering of language disqualifies women for positions of power and authority?	52	25	6
7.	Do you feel that sex-based terms/names tend to discourage women from aspiring to certain occupations and positions?	46	28	9

8.	Do you feel that particular grammar e.g assigning "he" as universal generics to signify both sexes represents women as inferior in comparison with their male counterparts?	39	31	13
9.	Do you think that language can function as a fundamental to gender inequality?	43	26	14
10.	Do you think that there are some language practices/behaviors that facilitate the marginalization of women?	58	17	8
11.	Do you feel that our society has done much to reduce the use of gendered words/expressions?	19	42	22
12.	In your view has our society achieved a reduction in the use of negative and biased language forms against women?	19	42	22

**Detailed Interpretation of Analysis:**

Total "Yes" .....	567			
Total "No" .....	312			
Total "Not Quite Sure" .....		= 117		
No. of Questionnaires.....	83			
No. of Questions .....	12			
			+	= 996
			x	= 996

## **Discussions**

Most respondents believe that the actions and behaviours of the average woman are negatively impacted by the gendering of language to discriminate and oppress women in various respects. A total of 43% of the respondents believe that language is the fundamental to gender inequality. 28% do not think so, while 14% are not quite sure. From this analysis there is overwhelming evidence that there exist certain linguistic behaviours that facilitate the marginalization of women.

A whopping 58% of the respondents believe that there are some language practices and behaviors that facilitate the marginalization of women. Again, as much as 52% of the respondents assert that gendering of language disqualifies women for positions of power and authority. The resultant effect of such practices is that women become limited in their aspirations and expectations to realize their God-given potentials as identical beings with men. Gendered language in this way acts as a tool of coercion in the process of socialization, confining women to particular inferior positions.

42% of the respondents feel that our society has not done much to reduce the use gendered words/expressions, and equally 42% of respondents maintain that our society is yet to achieve a reduction in the rate of use negative and biased language forms against women.

Globalization today has the potentials of changing many social realities, and this includes the issue of genderization of language. Under the influence of feminist movements like the Women's Liberation Movement that started since the mid-1970s, some paradigmatic shifts have occurred to usher in a flurry of sex-neutral linguistic terms; however in spite of such concerted efforts, gendered linguistic practices and behaviors still continue to flourish unchecked in our society.

### **Analysis of Some Gendered Linguistic Elements**

The analysis was done using the Hallidayan Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) Model. Halliday (1990) SFL interprets language as being a system network of meaning potentials. The approach is used to analyze language by relating it to its context in discourse.

### **Metaphoric Identification in Gendered Language**

Some gender-related words used metaphorically to convey prejudice and insult or belittle women include:

- ❖ Chick
- ❖ Babe
- ❖ Bitch
- ❖ Dish
- ❖ Tomato Jos ( Nigerian use-Hybridized)
- ❖ Pepperless (Nigerian Use)
- ❖ Gossip
- ❖ Hag
- ❖ Hussy

Such words carry negative connotation of portraying women as animals, children or even objects. This smacks of linguistic violence against women. Ross (1981) maintains that gendered language is oppressive to people through metaphoric identification, exclusion, labeling and referential genderization.

### **Exclusion in Gendered Language**

Dutta (2016) states that exclusion involves the creation of sex-based names, terms, and expressions to characterize essentially sex-neutral positions, occupations, etc., through exclusionary devices and sexist language which restrain one gender from pursuing activities similar to those allowed the other gender in the same society.

Semantic categories include: post master, man-of-war, man of letters, chairman, fireman, foreman, fisherman, policeman, spokesman, journeyman, clergyman, helmsman, craftsman, pointman, etc.



### **Labeling**

Labeling has to do with assigning arbitrary tags of “masculine” and “feminine” to conditions that have no relations to gender. Function activities like knitting, hair plaiting or braiding which are common place acts may be frowned at by boys just because they signal “feminine” fancies; these are viewed as emasculating and thus an insult to “masculinity”.

### **Referential Genderization**

This has to do with those linguistic practices that encourage the use of one-gender pronouns as generic universals and as appropriate markers for signifying both sexes. Such pronouns as generics are used to mean or signal a man or a woman semantically, thus creating the problem of semantic ambiguity. This is a misuse of referential genderization because for every linguistic community, where there is a “he” there is an identical reciprocal “she”. Such linguistic usage implies that femininity is inferior to masculinity, and the female gender is simply being tolerated by the male. This is an outright sign of gender oppression by means of language. Originally, women are simply marginalized just for being “women”, and this is amplified by certain linguistic habits whose usage facilitate this gender discrimination and sometimes project them as playthings or even “not fully human”, and therefore inferior.

### **Linguistic Terms that connote Masculinity and Femininity**

Kremer and Freed (2017) hold that by an analysis of specific words used in describing women only or men only, dominant views of what inheres in masculinity and femininity can be verified. According to them, men are much often described with words which connote competence in highly valued spheres. Such words were identified to include: “mandate, manager, mankind, mastery, man-hour, henchman, masterpiece, etc. These are all words that connote power and competence and are all derived from masculine nouns.

Women on the other hand are more often described with words associated with softness, nurturance, and a manipulative sexuality. For example, the following words connote femininity in the negative sense because they are used to insult masculinity: womanizer, womanish, sissy, hen-pecked, "woman wrapper"- (Nigerian use), nag, tamagant, cantankerous, etc.

Certain ideas about gender are conveyed through the linkage of specific words to one particular sex, and such words are implicitly or explicitly used to define masculinity or femininity. Such words include: boycott, boy wonder, tom boy, etc.

From the analysis, it is evident that in the area of linguistic interaction, language itself is basic to gender inequality. Certain linguistic practices engender discrimination and marginalization against women.

The mid-1970s heralded some studies on language variation targeted at dealing with the phenomenon of gendering of language. There has been sustained interest on this by Women's Liberation and other Feminist Movements to address linguistic practices that disparage women and alienate them from power and authority. Several gender-neutral vocabularies and linguistic structures have been introduced like: girlcott for boycott; chairperson for chairman, spokesperson for spokesman; salesperson for salesman; sportsperson for sportsman, etc.

**Common Gender-biased Terms and their Bias-free Substitutes**  
Service-Growth Consultant (2017) compiled a list of Gender-biased terms and their Bias-free substitutes as follows:

### **Occupational References**

<b>S/N</b>	<b>Biased</b>	<b>Bias-Free</b>
1.	Businessman	Business executive, entrepreneur
2.	Foreman	Superior
3.	Insurance man	Insurance agent
4.	Mailman	Mail carrier, Letter carrier
5.	Newsman	Journalist, Reporter
6.	Policeman	Police officer
7.	Repairman	Repair technician
8.	Salesman	Sales clerk, Sales rep., Sales agent
9.	Serviceman	Waiter, Server
10.	Workman	Worker

### **Role References**

<b>S/N</b>	<b>Biased</b>	<b>Bias-Free</b>
1.	Chairman	Chair, Chairperson
2.	Freshman	First year student
3.	Front man	Front, Figurehead
4.	Middleman	Go-between
5.	Spokesman	Spokesperson, Representative
6.	Self-mademan	Self-made person, Entrepreneur

### **Group References**

<b>S/N</b>	<b>Biased</b>	<b>Bias-Free</b>
1.	Brotherhood	Kinship, Community
2.	Common man	Common person, Average person
3.	Country man	Compatriot
4.	Fatherland	Native land
5.	Forefathers	Ancestors, Forebearers
6.	Fraternal	Warm, Intimate

7.	Frenchman	The French
8.	Man, Mankind	Humankind, Humanity, Human
9.	Rise of man	Rise of civilization
10.	Workingman	Wage earner
11.	Thinking man	Intellectual

### Other Stereotypes

S/N	Biased	Bias-Free
1.	King-size	Jumbo, Gigantic
2.	Kingmaker	Power behind the throne
3.	Maiden name	Birth name
4.	Maiden issue	First issue, Premier issue
5.	Maiden voyage	First voyage
6.	Man(verb)	Staff, Run
7.	Manhood	Adulthood
8.	Manly	Strong, Mature
9.	Manpower	Human resources
10.	Manhandle	Rough-handle
11.	Master (noun)	Owner, Expert, Chief, Superior
12.	Masterful	Skilled, Authoritative, Commanding
13.	Mastermind (noun)	Genius, Creator, Investigator
14.	Mastermind (verb)	Oversee, Launch, Originate, Umpire
15.	Masterplan	Comprehensive plan, Vision
16.	Masterstroke	Trumpcard, Stroke of genius

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The fact that most respondents agreed that they are aware of the use of sexist language in their day to day life, at home, workplace, social gatherings, etc., is a confirmation that gendered or sexist language exist in our linguistic communities. This is a fact that engenders sexism and gender discrimination against women. This negative linguistic practice functions as a tool of coercion to subjugate women and keep them estranged from positions of power and authority.

Researchers in “gender language interface” and sociolinguists should carry out more works on language and gender and their interactions in socio-cultural context. Linguistic anthropologist and scholars of sociolinguistics should pay more attention to the interrelationship between globalization in the 21st century and gender as regards linguistic forms and practices. Despite conscious efforts by Women’s Liberation Movements in the past and Feminists Movements today to address the situation and work with sociolinguists to develop gender –neutral linguistic vocabularies and structures, the problem of language gendering still strongly exists in various ways in English speaking worlds. The rapid effect in the growth of global consciousness should therefore be made to reflect on linguistic practices and on the interface of gender to create a socially conscious mentality towards gender-sensitive language for positive change.

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