THE SOCIAL SEMIOTICS OF LANGUAGE AND GENDER
IN GIKUYU LANGUAGE

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Abstract

Language plays a very significant role in the maintenance of sex role stereotypes. Recent research suggests that gender nouns such as man are not generic terms referring to humans but often refer exclusively to the male. The use of such terms in various role contexts serves to deny females identification in these contexts and stereotypes the females and males. This paper investigates the nature and context of what has now come to be regarded as sexism in language, for example, Gikuyu language. This paper examines the place and role of language in gender in a social semiotic framework and the extent to which the lexicon of the Gikuyu language is sexist. The study that constitutes the major framework on which this paper is based achieved this though a computer-based corpus of spontaneous conversational data between Gikuyu speakers. The basic argument is that languages such as Gikuyu relegate females to a subordinate position in which their roles and functions are suppressed in favour of the males. The conclusion is that language needs to redefine and exclude certain terms that hamper women’s development and that have created negative perceptions of the female and her image especially while promoting the male at the expense of the female.

Keywords: Language, Sexism, Social Semiotics.

Introduction

This paper is in response to a study entitled: ‘Language and Gender: A Case Study in Social Semiotics of the Lexicon of the Gikuyu Language’ (Wango, 1998).

Studies conducted to investigate whether the grammatical apparatus in human languages devalue women reveal that the English lexicon for example, shows a sexist bias against women (Graddol and Swann, 1989; Poyton, 1989; Smith, 1985). English words for women and men, for example, are rarely parallel and several differences and inequalities reflect themselves in the (English) lexicon. It is commonly acceptable
among these studies that generic ‘man’ and the pronoun ‘he’ in English, for example, easily refers to the male, thus excluding the female. This refers language sexist.

A question that arose from such findings was, can such observations be made in other languages, for example, Bantu languages? In what ways, for example, does sexism manifest itself in Gikuyu language? This paper summarises the observations of such a study that focused on words in Gikuyu in relation to gender with a view to determine:

(1) In what ways Gikuyu language devalues women; and,
(2) The extent to which the Gikuyu lexicon may be said to have a sexist bias.

Cameron (1985: 81-82) argues that people do not of necessity learn words from dictionaries but rather, they often infer their meanings in particular contexts. The study had set out to investigate the extent to which the meanings in some words in Gikuyu language tend to crystallise sexism, that is, gender attitudes of dominance and subservience that undermine the quest for equality among the sexes (Wango, 1998).

In the last two decades, a lot of debate has concentrated on women’s role in society and gender relations that has resulted in a more advanced feminism movement. Feminism aims at liberating women from all types of inequalities globally. This is because development cannot be achieved without the participation of all persons including women. Consequently, this paper highlights areas of language use that have direct implications for the feminist movement. It concurs with arguments put forward, for example, by Ortega (1990) a theologian who reckons that if we are committed to working for a better environment for all persons, we have to be aware that this is not possible so long as we are limited by the language (and the images embedded in it) that we use unconsciously or by choice.

The role of language in shaping our so called natural image of things is not a new topic to many people within and outside the realms of language. Giles (1979) a linguist notes that one of the important ways that we can influence and can be influenced by others is through language. Feminists on their part have argued that through language, women’s roles and stereotypes have been conditioned into society. Non-linguistics has also questioned the tradition of language with regard to females.
Elsa Tamez (1987 in Ortega, 1990), a liberation theologian, argues that language is very important and therefore, we must begin to take hold of it and discover the degree of discrimination women suffer in it. It is along these thoughts that Graddol and Swann (1989:132) thus conclude:

*Underlying much of the discussion of language and social values is the notion of a dominant social group (male, white, middle class etc.) that is somehow able to impose its meanings on the other language users.*

In language and gender studies, males are seen as imposing their meaning on females. Spender (1980:143) for example states that:

*Males, as the dominant group, have produced language, thought and reality.... In this process women have played little or no part.*

Male subjectivity has been the source of those meanings "including the meaning that their own subjectivity is objectivity". Hence an expansion of studies.

A distinction was made between sex and sexism. Biological sex and cultural sexism in Gikuyu, for example, is observed in personal names for males and females. A distinction was also made between grammatical gender and semantic sex (Crystal, 1985:133). In languages such as German, there is grammatical gender in which every noun has a gender that has to be learnt separately (Muhlhausler & Barre, 1990: 228). In semantic sex, words are analysed in terms of their gender content. Grammatical gender is not a feature of English except when certain parts of the language such as pronouns are analysed in such terms (Smith, 1985).

Gikuyu has no grammatical gender markers (Barlow, 1960). Like English it does not have an overt category of gender that requires all lexis (words) to be identified either as masculine, feminine, or neuter but it has a covert category revealed, for example, in personal names. Nevertheless, it has a semantic sex in which words can be analysed in terms of sex/gender semantic content and/or connotations (Wango, 1998).

The choice of lexis and a study in social semiotics was noteworthy. Halliday (1978:43) views the lexicon as “the most delicate grammar". Poynton (1989:50)
singles out the vocabulary (lexis) of a language as the most obvious repository of the meanings of man and woman in English. She contends that lexis is the most accessible part of language to those not trained as linguists and rat it seems that it is the lexis that conveys meaning. Hence the need to study words (lexis) in actual use in Gikuyu.

THE SOCIAL SEMIOTICS OF LANGUAGE AND GENDER

The Social Semiotic theory was first developed by Malinowski (1923) and later by Firth (1935, 1950) and Hymes (1967). It is well exemplified and advanced by Halliday (1978) and Halliday & Hasan (1989). Its concern is with the use of language. It has a social dimension that makes it particularly plausible to study gender. Its basis is in semantics and it seeks to consider and identify the role that certain linguistic items, for example, words, as text or in context function in building meaning. Also, language as social semiotics is highly associated with experience, reality, interaction in language use and socially in-built processes of language use (Halliday, 1978; Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Poynton, 1989).

According to this theory, the semantic system is the meaning potential embodied in language. It is itself the realization of a higher-level semiotic, a behavioural system, and a social semiotic. In the theory, language is understood and related in its relationship to social structure. The approach to understanding language is seen to lie in the study of texts. Text and co-text are intimately related. Neither can be 'enunciated' without the other (Halliday & Hasan, 1989:52). Included in the co-text or with the text in the social semiotic model is other non-verbal goings - on - the total environment in which a text unfolds. The nature of a text, however, is such that it is really made of meanings expressed, or coded in words and structures. Hence a text is a semantic entity and a social exchange of meanings. Thus both words and their use in social context can be studied.

Text is both a product and a process. It is a product in the sense that it is an output with a certain construction represented in systematic ways, and a process in the sense of a continuous process of semantic choice made in a network of
further potential choices, an interactive event, a social exchange of meaning. Similarly, it is both an object and an instance. Halliday & Hasan (1989:11-12) define a text as:

* a product of its environment, a product of a continuous process of choices in meaning... if we treat both text and context as semiotic phenomena, as 'modes of meaning', so to speak, we can get from one to the other in a revealing way.

Words can be studied as text and in context. This is because words and their connotations is a product of the environment. The speaker is continuously making a choice between one word and another. Actual linguistic analysis was therefore undertaken in two categories:

1) What the word means,
2) How the word/s was or are used in context.

In the semiotic model, this is done using the three features of the context of situation namely: the field - what is happening; the tenor - who are taking part; and, the mode - what part or role the language is playing (Halliday & Hasan, 1989:12). This was the basis of analysis of words meanings in context.

Function and meaning in the semantics are expressed in the following ways: field through experiential (transitivity, naming); tenor through interpersonal (mood, modality, person); and, mode in the textual (theme, information, cohesive relations). Poynton (1989:56) explains 'field' as:

* Portions of socially constructed experience recognized as discrete portions by means of that culture, commonly institutionalized to the extent of having a name (e.g. athletics, music) or maybe even to the extent of being identifiable as a formally constituted social institution.

Such 'names' included childbirth and wedding while 'social institutions' such as home and marriage corresponded to them. This showed up linguistically in terms of the differences in relations and what was talked about or expressed by people. In turn, it determined who was taking part, who used the word/s or whether it was general, and the role of language in communication and ultimately in social semiotics. Discussion were then carried out of the
various images and implications of the word/s with regard to the objectives, hypothesis and within the theoretical framework. Since the lexicon of a language is said to be organized into a hyponymic hierarchy with differing degrees of generality (Halliday & Hasan, 1989:80), the extent to which such generality is generic in relation to masculine and feminine relations was investigated.

Halliday's social semiotic approach to language had a number of real strengths. First, its basis is semantics not syntactic. While not denying that syntax is an important language component, it seeks to consider and identify the role of various linguistic items in any text in terms of their function in building meaning. Second, it is not uniquely interested in written language but with the study of both written and spoken texts in that each is illuminated because of its contrast with the other. Thus, it permitted useful movements across the text addressing the manner in which linguistic patterning built up meaning and the overall construction of a text.

The contribution of social semiotic to feminist language study is therefore threefold. Firstly, it has a literally criticism which enables the researcher to study the use of language in imaginative literature and female creativity. Secondly, it engulfs the theory of 'gendered subjectivity' (Spender, 1980; Cameron, 1985) that seeks to study whether women are alienated in language and society because they have to learn a male language. Thirdly, it is concerned with the overall construction of sexual identity and it insists on a linguistic basis for that process of construction. This makes it extraordinarily relevant in language and gender studies. To study language using the social semiotic model is therefore to concentrate upon exploring how language is systematically patterned towards important social ends.

Thus social semiotics does not counterpoise social (gender) nor the biological (sex) as two independent and reified domains of cause and effect because neither uniquely determines nor defines patterned social semiotic behaviour. Instead, it lays a link with social theory and articulates links between semiotic forms, their uses and functions and language since language is ultimately involved in the
manner in which we construct and organise our human experiences. It is a theory of social meaning making practices (Thibault, 1991:6). In addition, social semiotics is unique in that it strives to be a critical and self-reflexive theory of the dynamics of these social meaning making practices. It is critical in that it shows how regular and systematic patterning of a text and in context functions in ways that enact, maintain, reproduce or change the social semiotic system. It is self-reflexive because it accounts for its own place within the same critical perspective, that is, it defines its own relations to other social discourses, language structure, its position in the relations of meaning for example, and the interests these serve. Furthermore, it is concerned with identifying potential areas of intervention and change in the interrelations between society and language and the systems of social meaning making that constitute it.

As a result, the theory enabled the researcher to pay close attention to the ways in which word relations (both female and male) wield various forms of influence in the text of the (Gikuyu) language. The cultural ideologies emanating from the words are the ones the society has inherited as subject matter, are unquestionable, and are often acknowledged and passed on consciously or unconsciously. It therefore enabled proper interpretation of words individually and in context.

**FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS**

Linguists concerned with language, gender and sex have often raised the general question: can language have a sexist bias? If so, what are the effects of this? (Bodine, 1975; Miller and Swift, 1976). Others have argued that language is not neutral (Thome & Henry, 1975; Whorf, 1976; Spender, 1980). Rather than language being a vehicle that carries ideas, it is by itself a shaper of ideas and the programme for mental activity (Cameron, 1990). Language cannot of course be disassociated from meaning.

Yet linguistic inequalities have been shown to relate to social inequalities and practices (Poynton, 1989). Graddol and Swann (1989:98) discuss at length these linguistic distinctions, that is, bias in the structure of a language. The lexicon is the abstract system, they note. Their discussion is in agreement with other
linguists (Smith, 1985; Poynton, 1989) and the fact that even dictionary compilers need to agree on the meaning of a word. This implies that there is a particular meaning associated with a word as text, though the interpretation or use in the system may differ. In our study, word as text and in context corresponded very well, that is, the text and the co-text or what Graddol and Swann (1989:98) call system and use.

Four criteria were used to classify sexism in language (Wango, 1998:77-89):

a) *Exclusion / silence* - when the actions, achievements and contributions of women are omitted and /or ignored.

b) *Subordination / naming and representation* - in which the females are defined and seen through a relationship to male rather than as independent individuals.

c) *Degradation* - in which the female is described only in stereotyped roles with less than her full range of human interests, traits, abilities and capabilities.

d) *Distortion* - in which females are described with an emphasis on their appearance and stereotypical behaviour such as talkativeness, immaturity and emotionality or society's general feelings.

Analysis of the data in the study focused on whether words in Gikuyu language possess a clear and overt semantic marker of masculinity, femininity or generic aspects (Smith, 1985:37). The following was noted (Wango, 1998:95):

**Table 1: Words Summary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NO. OF WORDS</th>
<th>PRESTIGIOUS (Positive)</th>
<th>NO PRESTIGE (Negative)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GENERIC</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MASCULINE</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEMININE</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Feminine words outnumbered masculine ones by 35 to 24 (*Table 1*). Masculine words with positive connotation (prestige) were more frequent than feminine ones for the same by a ratio of 21:23. However, feminine words with negative
connotations (no prestige) outnumbered masculine negative words by a ratio of 12:3. (Table 1) in spite of the number of masculine / feminine words. A slightly larger number of overtly marked masculine words were noted that are sometimes used in a generic sense. A smaller number of overtly marked feminine words used in a generic sense were also noted. However, the feminine words had no prestige (negative) unlike the masculine ones which have prestige (positive) when used (Wango, 1998: 95).

Another database used in the study to determine the degree of sexism and gender bias in Gikuyu language was the analysis of word order/phrases in the samples in the study. The most common [female male] and [male female] pairings in Gikuyu were studied and their frequency in use.

Gender biased phrasing has an adverse impact on a large segment of society especially when it gives prominence to certain persons and not others (Smith, 1985; Poynton, 1989). It is another asymmetry that shows the way women and men are represented in the order given to both when referred to together (Smith, 1985:47). There seems to be a particular order and in many cases, it seems procedural to use the order [male female] and not [female male]. This was investigated in Gikuyu (Wango, 1998: 103).

**Table 2: Word Order/ Phrase Summary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF PHRASE</th>
<th>NUMBER OF PHRASES (in Occurrence)</th>
<th>FREQUENCY (In Occurrence)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[FEMALE MALE]</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[MALE FEMALE]</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out of 50 phrases with [female male] [male female] pairings studied, 26 were [female male] while 24 were [male female]. This would seem to suggest that such pairings do not favour any of the sexes. However, the contrary was true in actual (normal) language use as evident from Table 2 in that [male female] pairings far much outnumbered [female male] pairings by a ratio of 178:41 (81% : 19% respectively). Thus the pairings were in favour of the male.
Though little has been studied in terms of the social and psychological significance in the order of word pairs, it is a known fact that women often come second (Smith, 1985). This was found to be true in this study. Studies in language and gender have argued that the connotation of other ordered word pairs such as good - bad, rich - poor, life - death, white - black, responsible - irresponsible, moral - immoral validates the need for in evaluation of such pairings. This is because it would seem to signify to the reader or listener that females have less status or importance than males and that males are more valued (Smith, 1985). Besides, there is no reason linguistically whatsoever why any cannot come before the other if they are equal.

In conclusion, naming which is essentially a matter of lexis (Poynton, 1989:12) involves a choice of one word as different from a another. A name is a title. It identifies a person, thing or idea. It is also a symbol that stands for the unique combination of characteristics and attributes that define a person as an individual (Smith, 1985:38). Thus when a speaker makes a choice between any of the words or chooses to use a particular phrase, the speaker often makes a choice as different from another. This must not be gender biased.

**SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

This paper sought to examine the social semiotics of language and gender. It argues that words are very important, the basis of speech. Yet in the analysis of words as text and in context, it is clear that languages possess clear marking for feminine, masculine and generic aspects. In most cases both sexes tend to use words in the same way. Sexism in language that perpetuates such gender stereotypes and maintains the status quo propagates the wrong concept that the two sexes are different and especially validates the male as of greater importance and value and the female as of lesser importance.

Certain words also exclude females and males. Words referring to males and females have different connotations, both negative and positive, and prestige. Even when certain terms that exclude either sex are understood to be generic, the ambiguity of intention cannot be resolved since certain terms exclude
either sex as text and in context. Consequently, certain masculine and feminine terms have equivalents while others do not. When viewed in a social semiotic framework, this reflects an ideology of gender in which certain social aspects are seen with a gender bias, a fact that is reinforced by the prominence given in word order and which shows the extent to which language is sexist. Also, feminine and masculine terms have different evaluative loadings referring to their respective gender. Notable among them are the number of words with positive prestige referring to either sex as compared to words with negative prestige.

In order for women to contribute effectively towards building a positive image for themselves in society, language needs to be redefined. Issues raised in regard to social (cultural) life trace this to the patriarchal social system. Notwithstanding, women occupy a subordinate place in many systems and are socialized to accept their place. Language propagates the societal values that have been normalized. It may be the case therefore that there is need for change in attitude in society and in language. In this view, we conclude that the languages need to be redefined.

The social organization has been woven to support and substantiate male superiority and female inferiority. For this reason, there is need for a reconstruction of beliefs and values to dislodge this prejudice and lay it to rest. While research into this topic no doubt contributes to language, discourse, and sexist discourse (Poynton, 1989; Cameron, 1990; Tannen, 1993), it should hopefully represent an inevitable departure from a simple pursuit of knowledge. In particular, it should make clear certain language and social aspects from which the social semiotic framework of any society is based on. Work dwelling on women and those undertaken by women or men on language or other aspects of society must therefore reflect in Cameron’s words (1990:3) "to a greater or lesser extent, the influence of feminism .... and foreground issues of gender difference and male dominance in society". That is, such studies should also strive to redress the balance. Recommendations made in respect of such studies should take this into consideration.
Lexis or words play a significant role in meaningful communication especially among the laymen who are not trained as Linguists. The choice and use of lexis should therefore be taken seriously especially the semantics and the connotations embedded in each word either as text or in context. This, it may be argued, may be a significant step towards improving language, not just for its own sake, but also for the sake of fairness to all social groups.

Issues raised therefore are of importance to all members of society and should not be confined to feminism, feminists and to research. In particular, they should be of particular concern to parents, educators, and to the media because they are the primary agents of society in the socialization of children into these institutionalized and propagated attitudes. Children learn their initial categories from parents and educators. The media continues to propagate the same at the advanced stages and beyond. Children hear and read words and they eventually internalise them. These words become their words and the meanings and attitudes (as well as stereotypes) embedded in them are adopted as the social norm.

To feminists, the issues raised should be used as a basis to press for reforms in such institutions as the publication of books and national broadcasts. To researchers, more research should be undertaken in the languages with the aim of investigating and correcting such imbalance if any. For as is argued in this paper, there is need to know what it is we teach our children to think and feel about themselves, about each other and others, and use the means by which they learn so to improve such attitudes. This is because lexis being the most accessible part of language to both the linguists and the non-linguists, and taking into consideration that it is lexis that carries meaning (Poynton, 1989) needs to be redefined to avoid any bias among social groups and, or the sexes in any given society. This is also taking into consideration the fact that the use of a text involves certain choices and not others (Halliday & Hasan, 1989).

The study does acknowledge efforts made by others in relation to language and gender. For example, it reiterates Oduol's (1990) recommendation that people have to pay particular attention to the kind of language they use in relation as it
establishes and identifies their ideological stance, their beliefs, values and attitudes. Thus the meaning of whatever they say will be derived from the actual choices that they make in using language. The choice of a word/s is therefore not entirely random. It relates to the context of the speaker, the goal and/or purpose of the talk and the beliefs, attitudes and values are implicated in it. This is true of people in influential positions, in the media (radio and newspapers), parents, adults, and publishers in the choice of words, co-occurrence of phrases and use of expressions.

The analysis adopted in this study also constituted a radical change from general semantics to the social semiotics, which is more dynamic, sociolinguistic and more experiential and language use oriented. Investigations conducted along these lines have resulted in an ultimate description of a more cultural but linguistic nature. This should be the way to describe any language, that is, language in use. The use of a corpus for example has shown that there is a lot to learn about language using the computer than it was possible to imagine years ago. It reveals the detailed analysis possible using the computer and the application of computers to study language corpora does reveal new facts that need to be built in our description of languages.

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