

RETHINKING MASCULINE LINGUISTICS FOR INCLUSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT; AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

This study examines the complex relationship between language, power and economic development with a focus on how English language systems, adapted for use in Nigeria, construct and promote sex inequalities that impact inclusive economic development. Using linguistic relativism theory, this study provides an overview of masculinelinguistics and how they sustain male dominance which limits female participation in

nation building. Proposing strategies for rethinking masculine linguistics, the study amplified the need for change through questioning standard language ideology and developing policies that recognize inclusive language forms for enhanced participation in nation building.

Keywords: Masculine linguistics, inclusive economic development, linguistic relativism, English language

Introduction

Language determines thoughts and it plays a significant role in shaping perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours towards various aspects of human undertaking which include economic development. In most world economies, Nigeria inclusive, English language is most sought after language as a native tongue, a second language or a foreign language respectively. This versatility accounts for its multitudinous users, its increased dominance of use which significantly impacts socio-political and economic development of nation states. The English language as used in Nigeria is standardized and prescriptive carrying along meanings that are sometimes illogical and inconsistent, but which are sustained as established norms of usages. The underlying socio-cultural ideologies entrenched in these ‘normalized’ usages are instruments that delineate gender; thus, perpetuating stereotypes about roles and capabilities of males and females within the Nigerian society.

In this paper, masculine linguistics allude to language categories, structural patterns of use and the

cultural identities and social realities built into English language meanings from context of use. This investigation rooted in the relationship existing between masculine linguistics and economic development examines how male hegemony inadvertently built into English language, Nigerian's official language, largely limits gender mainstreaming and by extension, the economic potentials of Nigerian female population, about half the nations population, thereby hindering the country's overall economic growth and development.

Research Focus

This research focused on deciphering how masculine linguistic patterns reinforce male dominance.

Strategies needed to transform male hegemony in English language towards mainstreaming the females for Nigerian's economic development

Significance of the study

The study which investigates the importance of inclusive language in relation to sustainable development is aimed at making available informed positions to guide policies and practice and to promote gender equality and empowerment in Nigeria. It would also provide insight into the existing body of literature on language, gender and economic activities.

Theoretical consideration

This work adopted the linguistic relativism theory. This theory, otherwise called the Sapir Whorf hypothesis was proposed by Edward Sapir (1884 – 1939)

and Benjamin Whorf (1897 – 1941); explicitly expressed by Von Humboldt (1767 – 1835) and Johann George Hamann (1930 – 1988). However, the theory owes its popularity to Roger Brown (1925 – 1977) and Eric Lennerberg (1921 – 1975) using their color focus on how language influences the cognitive processes principles and persuasions; thus, resulting in the multiplicity of views of reality.

The theory maintains that every language is molded by the values espoused in the culture that it serves. However, structure and lexicon differs between languages in a systematic way and relying on the specific character of every language, each distinct language tends to encode and interpret reality to the extent to which such language in use is able to represent reality. Consequently, as humanity evolves and new ideas impact reality, language forms also evolve to ascribe significance to new perceptions.

This theory was chosen for this study because of its practical value at this period of changing gender relation which requires that each language directs thoughts to a precise picture of reality.

Review of Related Literature

Every human society is deeply rooted in the complex but peculiar relationships enacted by the sexes. The resulting unacceptable behaviours created, shaped as well as explained the sociological terrain, economic and political values as well as an individual's perception of self within the society. However, sex which is a biological construct has superimposed socially

constructed expectations known as gender roles. These culturally constructed gender roles affect the life opportunities open to the sexes. For instance, societal values which made such occupations as nursing, food vending, hairdressing, home managing etc. feminine, thus giving room for the skewed ideas that males who undertake them are either lazy, hopeless, shameless or irresponsible. Similarly, masculinity is associated to power thereby making the social, political, and economic institutions the preserve of males and females who get into them are classified as arrogant, unyielding and unfeminine (Amadi, 2021).

In addition, human societies, every language intertwines with peoples socially held values to the extent that words and their patterns of usages emphasize the (un)importance of actions, reflect and reinforce ideologies and power structures as well as shape users' perceptions, attitude and behaviours.

The Global English

English language, a West Germanic, a most used and studied language of about 1.456 million world population (Statista, 2023) is also an inter-ethnic language for communication in multilingual nations. English became a window to the world owing to the quantum information imputed in English by scientists, business organizations and numerous internet users. English users are classified into native and non-native speakers and the varieties they produce as standard and non-standard forms/New Englishes. But in adopting English for use, users inadvertently acquire the nuances

inherent in the English structure which transmit sexist values that may be foreign in some languages. For instance, in Igbo language, kinship terms; mother, father, brother, sister do not go with adjectives even when used to represent non biological relatives. Such words as stepmother, stepfather, stepsister, stepbrother do not exist in Igbo Language. Similarly, greeting for the English is a social token (Nordquist, 2018). But, in Igbo Language, '*How are you?*' is a form of greeting as well as a request for information on the wellbeing of the addressee and that of other members of their families. Furthermore, femaleness and maleness are unmarked in Igbo language. Third person singular pronouns '*it/she/he*' are represented as 'O' while plural '*they*' is '*Ha!*'. Igbo pronouns are therefore gender neutral significations. So, in adopting gendered English through the functional use of these markers, users are believed to acquire a new set of values and a new set of cultural identity (Umera-okeke, 2012).

Nigeria and Sexist English Language

English language, severely criticized for being sexist (Spender 1980, Pauwels 1998, Umerah-Okeke 2012) in reinforcing male dominance in its vocabularies, grammatical structure, and idiomatic expressions (Tan 2020, Amadi 2022, Kum 2022) embodies the misogynistic culture of its users. Creating, perpetuating, and reinforcing the gender stereotypes stored in English not only make it impossible for English to serve all peoples equally, but it also impacts socially held values of Nigerians towards perpetuating discrimination and prejudice against the female population. Unfortunately,

sexism in English language is an integral part of the language adopted for use in Nigeria. Thus, the English language taught in Nigerian schools and colleges have marked binaries; Actor-Actress; Male-female; Poet—Poetess; Steward—Stewardess etc. Also, *-mansuffixes* abound in occupational names e.g. salesman, fisherman, mailman etc. Some occupational titles have adjectives affixed for the female gender e.g., female doctor, female professor, female lawyer etc. Most intriguing is that these professionals undertook a study of required and uniform course content with their male counterpart before certification. Marking out these occupation titles, subordinate female since their expertise is beclouded by societal ideas of femaleness which include lack of critical thinking, emotional instability, and even incompetence. Similarly, schools teach male first word order e.g. *Man—woman; Father—Mother; Brother—sister; Uncle—Aunt; Mr.—Mrs.; Sir—Lady; Boy—girl; King—Queen; Bachelor—Spinster* etc. (Amadi, 2021). Likewise, sexist culture and misogyny exact influence on the meanings associated to such words as *Leaders, Executive, and Professional*, otherwise neutral signifiers, which are used now to ascribe power, strength, and rationality to maleness. In similar vein, English also contains sexist idiomatic expressions such as ‘*man-up*’, ‘*be a man*’, ‘*master strength*’, ‘*Alpha male*’, ‘*King pin*’ ‘*Master mind*’ etc. Just as well, some everyday sentences reinforce and excuse male aggression. Examples include ‘*she provoked him*’, ‘*Boys will be boys*’, ‘*she asked for it*’ etc. Further more, English language users in Nigeria also adopt generic ‘*he*’ pronoun and ‘*sir*’ in official correspondences where the

recipient is unknown, with the thinking that a male is more likely to occupy such positions of authority.

Overall, these sexist nuances in the English language used in Nigeria by Nigerians remain in-spite of the linguistic neutral proposition put forward by feminist linguists and echoed by the European Parliament in 2008 where they adopted a set multilingual guideline on gender neutral languages. Retaining this sexist linguistic convention, which undermine self-esteem, affects mental health, reinforces the notion of male superiority and limits social change within the Nigerian polity, has tangible economic consequences.

Practical Concerns in Retaining Sexist English Structure in Nigeria

Nigeria, a society of six geographical zones; North-East, North-West, North-Central, South-West, South-East, and South zone is bedeviled by socio-cultural and economic problems which exacerbates the dichotomy existing among its peoples. These zones are home to about 500 indigenous languages (Ethnologue, 2009) and 250 ethnic nationalities. All four language families are identifiable in Nigeria, thus making Nigeria a linguistic microcosm of Africa (Udoh and Emanuel, 2020; Blench, 2020). With this multiplicity of languages, achieving mutual intelligibility and establishing cohesion among the people are major challenges. The frequently exhibited mistrust and skirmishes is offshoot of segregation occasioned by nepotisms and ethnic jingoism. The need for a unifying language led to the adoption of English as the official language of

independent Nigeria and as the primary language of education. However, in adopting for use the prescriptive and sexist English linguistic structures, the patriarchal leaning Nigeria culture found expression in the very nature of English that grants power, influence and control to males. These have far reaching consequences on the individuals and on the society. It is therefore important to recognize the harm caused by sexist language, since language is a mirror of society and a storehouse of the values each culture professes. Exposure to a sexist ideology bearing language inadvertently exposes its users to sexist behaviour (Kouderbung et.al. 2020). Sexist language is known to perpetuate the notion of an immutable characteristic behaviour that determine sex roles in society, undermine female voices, perpetuate intergenerational inequality, limits equitable access to education and resources, and erode trust in human institutions which appear biased and discriminatory. These manifest limitations result in reduced workforce participation, reduced entrepreneurship and innovations among females, inefficient allocation of human capital, and blurring of a nations competitive edge.

Femaleness in a Nigerian Nation under Distress

Nigeria, the most populous and most endowed in human and natural resources in West Africa is grappling with severe economic downturn (Nwaonuma& Ebube Chima, 2023). The poverty rate placed at 40.7% by the World Bank in April 2024 is exacerbated by the economic recession of the last decade. In 2023, the inflation rate is put at 22.79%, Naira depreciation at

71.7% and a whopping 37 million Nigerians are currently living below poverty line (State of Economy Report). Several factors contribute to the failing economy. For instance, the oil boom of the 70s and the 80s saw Nigeria divest from agriculture. The cocoa from the west, the groundnut pyramid from the north, and the palm oil from the east, major export materials vanished. The over-reliance on crude oil sales, periodic gloat in the international crude oil market, and violent disruptions in supply by resource control agitators had debilitating consequences on the economy. Most worrisome for the economy, is the over dependence of Nigerians on imported/finished goods. Local manufacturing dwindled leading to loss of jobs. With a total of 45.95 billion US dollar worth of import into Nigeria, pressure on foreign exchange increased resulting in widespread inflation that saw to the steep fall of the standard of living especially for the low income or one income source households. In addition, major divestments of conglomerates from Nigeria in the last two years intensified the income and wealth inequality, economic instability, brain drain and disruption in the activities of small business they sustain.

UNAID states that during the period of economic crunch, global gender inequalities make it that females are disproportionately affected. Hence, females, especially the uneducated who make up 60% of the Nigerians vulnerable population, loose more opportunities in the workforce. Obaham et al. (2022) using the qualitative research method in examining females as a percentage (%) of the total labor force in Nigeria, found a significant gender gap in labor force participation in Nigeria and the variables they studied

evidenced negative relationship with economic growth in significant sectors of the economy. The reduced female participation in the economy is exacerbated because of their culturally assigned role as unpaid caregiver coupled with limited access to education and economic activities which increased their susceptibility towards poverty and hunger, gender based violence, and overall stunted prospects for the next generation.

Breaking the Cycle of Sexist Language for Enhanced Economic Development

Gender inequality is rooted in all patriarchal cultures. These culturally entrenched values change as individuals' perception of self and of the environment change. Feminist linguists call attention to the instances of language use in Nigerian society which demean or denigrate femaleness. The pervasiveness of these sexist linguistic structures perpetuate gender inequality and discrimination. These have a profound impact on women's ability to engage in economic activities, access resources, and participate in decision making processes. Consequently, English language pedagogy, the most obvious means of transferring English language structures must be degendered. The teaching of sexist structures and vocabularies with sexist undertone which are part of English as a second language (ESL) pedagogy are unnecessary. New concepts which may sound or feel incorrect or inconsistent with traditional usages should be adopted for use. English Language is replete with such inconsistencies already, for instance, in advocating for the use of '*hen*' as a gender neutral signification representing '*she and he*', it should be noted that it is not

as strange as the plural of man being *men* instead of '*mans*', *foot* as *feet* instead of '*foots*' and *sheep* retaining '*sheep*' in its plural form instead of '*sheeps*'. English language has the capacity to entertain other such absurdities.

Furthermore, sex differences are biological norms of life but gender classifications that constraints and impedes upon an individual's contributions towards achieving a transformation in the economy need to be jettisoned. Addressing subliminal bias through training and education and through providing policies and procedures that promote equality would encourage more female participation in business and in leadership.

Conclusion

Language is used to do gender for it affects and is affected by the mental representations of the speakers who use it. As such, a language which encodes an unbiased and equal representation to maleness and femaleness is required in achieving a balanced and equal society. While linguistic change is way slower than social change, it is reasonable to suggest a critical understanding of the ways and the manner the linguistic systems used in communication impact on the sexes. Humans should fulfil their sex roles without the rank scale that gives rise to confusion and tensions among the sexes. Questions should be raised on the standard language ideology and the gender discourse should leave the classroom to the larger society for the necessary change to be achieved.

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