

Linguistic Sexism: A Case of Gikuyu Language Discourse in Kenya

Nancy Ikarria-Maina

Department of English and Linguistics in Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya

Abstract: *Sexist language is considered to be any language that is supposed to include all people, but, unintentionally or intentionally excludes gender which is either males or females. By looking at linguistic sexism, this paper aims at finding out the relationship between language and gender. Many people who speak Gikuyu language run into the difficulty of making the choices between certain words in their everyday discourses. They wonder which to choose – the chaimani (chairman) has arrived for the meeting or mutungoria (the chairperson) has arrived for the occasion when referring to a woman. This is the stuff the Gikuyu language is made of. It is ridden with linguistic sexism that excludes women and trivializes what women do. This paper examines elements of sexism in the Gikuyu language which abound in the morphology, syntax and semantics of the language.*

Key words: Sexist, Linguistic, Gikuyu, discourse, males, females, language, Feminism.

1. Introduction

Gikuyu is an Ethnic group in Kenya comprising 20.28% of the Kenyan population. Of these, 49.49% are males and 50.51% are females. According to Barlow (1960), Kenyatta (1961) and Gatheru (1964), the language spoken by Gikuyu people is known as Gikuyu language. Therefore, the name Gikuyu in this paper refers to the people and the language. Language is both an instrument of communication and an instrument of knowledge of the world around us. According to Jiménez Catalán (2005), language is the means through which people shape their view of society, organize their knowledge; learn new things and, above all, assimilate the norms and social patterns of their community. Language articulates consciousness, reflects culture, and affects socialization; hence, the need to recognize the importance of transforming language from traditional usage to more liberating one that is gender-sensitive. Language is dynamic and reflects changes in society and contributes to such changes. Using non-discriminatory language is, of course, a part of this dynamic process.

Analyzing language is very important. As Labov (1982) postulated, there is a great deal to be done in describing and analyzing the patterns of use of languages and dialects within a specific culture: the forms of speech events, the rules for appropriate selection of speakers; the interrelations of speakers, addressee, audience, topic, channel and setting; and the ways in which the speakers draw upon the resources of their language to perform certain functions. The year 1975 is seen to have launched the field of gender and language with the publication of Lakoff (1975), Graham (1975) and Thorn and Henry (1975) which argued that there are systematic differences in the language of women and men in terms of language use. Lakoff for example, examines language used by women and men. Graham and Spender (1980) established that in material written for children, the generic masculine 'he' is overwhelmingly actualized. Deborah (1978) observes that gender differences in speech are not evident in every word but are reflected and constructed through aspects of the structuring of discourse.

This paper which falls in the field of sociolinguistics looks at linguistic sexism in Gikuyu speech community. This is in line with the concerns of sociolinguistics that deals with the relation of language to society' Hudson (1996). That is, the branch of linguistics that is concerned with investigating, disclosing and ascertaining the relations of language to varied aspects of society, such as social class, ethnic origin, life style, education, age, sex, attitudes, emotions, and so forth. Sociolinguists deal with a shift from the over weaning preoccupation with structure and setting to the communicative purpose of the speech act. This branch of linguistics recognizes the fact that: The social roles and the psychological attitudes of the participants toward each other in a conversation (employer-employee, teacher-pupil, doctor-patient, parent-child) for example, the place and time of the communication act and the activity or topic being discussed will determine to a large extent the form, tone, and appropriateness of any oral or written message Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1973). Consequently, this paper sets out to define and explain linguistic sexism in Gikuyu language.

2. Statement of the Problem

Language is not static. We live in a patriarchal world that values men over women. Our language is a reflection of these values. Social changes produce changes in language. This affects values in ways that have not been accurately understood. Language incorporates (reflects and expresses) social attitudes and values. If language and literature reflect and express social attitudes, they also can have the power to influence, to shape, those attitudes and values. It is constantly changing to reflect the changing nature of society. As we are moving towards equality in all areas of life, it is important that our language facilitates and reflects this change. Again, communicative competence goes beyond the ability to construct grammatically correct sentences to being aware of culturally suitable communication. This study, therefore, sets out to define and explain sexism, linguistic sexism and establish the Gikuyu language as a sexist language and finally offer some alternatives to some sexist or exclusive words in the Gikuyu language to reflect the changing nature of the society.

2.1 Objectives

To explain and show the various elements of linguistic sexism found in Gikuyu language.

2.2 Research Questions

Which are the various elements of linguistic sexism found in Gikuyu Language?

3. Literature Review

Sexism is defined by Wilson (1997) as a set of expectations of women's appearance, actions, skills, emotions and proper place in society. It is generally conceived as anything that conveys that, one sex is superior to the other. In most societies, it is commonly shown in behaviours that depict males as superiors to females. Sexism has always been a problem in Western society. It has been a problem that many people overlook, simply because they think it does not actually exist! However, sexism is present in our current society today. A sexist action is, therefore, one which is predicated on an assumption of a difference between men and women which is not biologically justified and which is harmful to the interests of specific women (or men) or women (or men) generally. Graddol and Swan (1989) defined sexism as any discrimination against women or men because of their sex, and made on irrelevant grounds. So according to this distinction, men too can be the victims of sexism though I suspect it is relatively rare.

By typical definition, sexist language is considered to be any language that is supposed to include all people, but, unintentionally (or not) excludes a gender. This can be either males or females. Sexist language is especially common in situations that describe jobs. There are common assumptions that all doctors are men, all nurses are women, all coaches are men, or all teachers are women, all masons are men and all house helps are women. Most people would agree that these assumptions are largely untrue today, though the language used often perpetuates these stereotypes. Atkinson (1993) defines linguistic sexism as a wide range of verbal practices, including not only how women are labeled and referred to, but also how language strategies in mixed sex interaction may serve to silence or depreciate women as interactants. A study by Zimmerman and West (1975) and West (1984) found out that men tend to dominate men-women talk. They are seen to talk more than women, in mixed-sex conversations, men's topics are more pursued, while women play a supportive role. Maltz and Borker (1982) focused on gender differences. They drew up a list of women features such as the tendency to ask questions and to make use of positive minimal responses such as *yeah* or *mhm* and men's features such as a tendency to interrupt women. Maltz and Borker argue that these differences arise because women and men come from different sociolinguistics subcultures. Ivy and Backlund (1994) added that if sexism refers to attitudes and behaviours that denigrate one sex to the exaltation of the other, then it follows that sexist language would be verbal communication that conveys those attitudes or behaviours. At its crudest and most hurtful, sexist language is a tool used to damage someone. Rather than a blind but innocent repetition of

sexist behavior and terms many of us grow up with, some people carry that further and try to really emotionally harm a person by targeting them with sexist comments. But whether it is used on purpose or blindly, it is a form of abuse or bullying and I think we can all do well to watch what words escape our lips, just in case we are repeating things we've always repeated without even knowing that they may be hurting someone. Fromkin, Rodman & Hymes (2007) typified the discrimination against women by quoting Graham's funny analogy: If a woman is swept off a ship into the water, the cry is Man overboard. If she is killed by a hit-and-run driver, the charge is manslaughter. If she is injured on the job, the coverage is workmen's compensation. But if she arrives at the threshold marked Men only, she knows the admonition is not intended to bar animals or plants or inanimate objects. It is meant for her. The stereotype for a woman must be everything bad while in the same circumstance, a man is always dignified.

This shows the level at which the language has demeaned women. Many feminists have examined the representation of women in language and have, according to Cameron (1998), concluded that our language is sexist: that is they represent or name 'the world from a masculine viewpoint and in accordance with stereotyped beliefs about the sexes. Cameroon complained of the 'invisibility' of women: the way they are excluded from research or at best defined as peripheral and deviant. This means that language encodes a culture's values, and in this way reflects sexist culture. He stated that Language could be seen as a reflection of sexist culture where sexism is not merely reflected but acted out and thus reinforced in a thousand banal encounters.

English which is one of the world's most spoken languages is sexist. Sociolinguistic researches, over the years have shown that the English language favors the masculine gender as opposed to the feminine. The survey of English dialects provides little information on women speakers, because as Harold Orton (1962) put it "men speak vernacular (standard English) more frequently, more consistently and more genuinely than women". As a result, major sociolinguistics studies have excluded women. Sexism in the English language is only one of the many products brought to us by acculturation. In reality, women are treated unfairly not only in the field of language but also in other factors as well. Back in history, we learned that women were not given the same benefits that were given to males. For example, only men could vote in the elections, own property. Also, women status as legal minors could be justified on the grounds of their 'childlike' mental inferiority coupled with the argument that higher education for women would shrivel their reproductive organs and render them sterile (Cameroon 1998). Thus women were only treated as properties, which is a form of discrimination against them.

The problem with sexism in English, go way beyond questions of vocabulary. Sexism is built into the way the language is structured, and the very concepts each of us uses to describe ideas about language. Throughout all this, sociolinguists aimed to prove whether or not English is a sexist language. The results showed that there are evidences that English is indeed sexist. Goddard and Patterson decided to refer to the English language as a gendered language

based on three facts: It is a language that is made up of sex-exclusive vocabulary (hunk for man, chick for women). The language contains linguistic items that remain the same but change in meaning when referring to a man or a woman (tramp). It is a language that carries within it a shared understanding about how men and women are meant to behave and the characteristics they are meant to possess.

English language deliberately discriminates against one sex in favour of the other. Apart from being found in the vocabulary; sexism is built into the way the language is structured and in the semantics of language, as well as in the very concepts each of us uses to describe ideas about language. Generic Pronouns preference provides a classic instance of sexist language. The sexism in English is to ignore women by allowing masculine terms to be used specifically to refer to males and generically to refer to human beings in general. It is mainly shown in the pronouns: he, she, his, her, himself and herself. The pronoun system uses him, his, him, and him both in the literal masculine sense and in the generic sense to mean a person of either sex. When such terms are used generically, misinterpretation can result and females are unintentionally excluded from consideration. There is no pronoun for a person of unknown sex. On the formal occasions, he, his or him must be used to refer to such indefinite pronouns as each, everyone, no one, nobody, anyone, anybody and somebody. For example: (i) Everybody congratulated him. (ii) One must remember to give thanks. (iii) Every good citizen should love his fellow citizens. (iv). The more education an individual attains, the better his occupation is likely to be. Use of he, him, and his has historically been dictated by those who enforce the canons of Standard English. What is of interest to us in this context is that use of these pronouns makes women invisible. Feminist linguists have commented that the practice of using the masculine for generic purposes makes women invisible in language and relegates women to a secondary position dependent on man.

Women are often rendered invisible when we are referring to the general gender 'man'. Like many words, the English word "man" has more than one meaning. Indeed, this word can be said to have layers of meaning. The word man is therefore inherently ambiguous. It is a generic term that refers to (a) a human being; (b) human beings as a group or race; or (c) a male human being. The generic "man" is both personal and singular. At the same time, it also means the totality of the human race. Because this word is singular and personal, it demands the use of singular and personal pronouns: he, him, his. This word has a Hebrew Old Testament equivalent, adam, and a Greek New Testament equivalent, anthropos. The word gradually narrowed in meaning to become a word that refers to adult male human beings. Still in the language today, it is still used to refer to males and females but to the meticulous eyes of English majors, the word is used to signal inferiority to the women race.

4. Methodology

The data on which the researcher bases his claims were collected from her own speech community. Over fifty spontaneous conversations during casual visits were

collected from different rural areas where Gikuyu speakers are predominantly located. The data were analysed to identify and explain the elements of linguistic sexism in the language. This is a descriptive study. My intuition as a Gikuyu native speaker helps me to analyze the data.

5. Discussion and Research Findings

5.1 Sexism and Semantic Collocation

In Gikuyu language, derogatory terms used for female outnumber that for male. Plenty of pairs of words, such as gicokio (a female divorcee) kiere kia njiraini (a loose girl), kiheti (spinster), should have connotation and denotation to the same degree. Whereas, only the words used for female bear the derogatory sense. In Gikuyu language, a word may have different connotations when it is collocated with a male term or a female term. When applied to women, the same words are likely to narrow and assume sexual connotations. For example (a) dagitari (doctor), njaji (lawyer), karani (clerk/accountant). (b) Maraya (prostitute), githaria (promiscuous) murimi (farmer). In (a), the normal conclusion is that a doctor or a lawyer or a clerk/accountant or a member of one of the respected professions is always a male. Examples in (b) could be interpreted to mean that anyone who is a prostitute, promiscuous or a farmer is a female. If the word Mutangatangi (Tramp) which means a person with no home or job who wanders from place to place is used to refer to a woman, it is always interpreted to mean a woman who is sexually immoral. If it is used to refer to a man it is interpreted to mean a person with no home or job, who wanders from place to place, or a drifter. From the above, we can see that the same word shifts from being positive male to being negative female. The way meaning is created in Gikuyu society depends upon dividing the world into positive-masculine and negative-feminine according to the semantic sex prototypes.

5.2 Sex-paired Words

In Gikuyu language there are a lot of sex-pair words, which are quite different from each other according to their semantic meaning. Generally speaking, men's agent nouns are often considered to be positive while those for women often obtain a negative meaning. Word pairs like muhiki-muhikania (bridegroom-bride), muka-muthuri (wife-husband), demonstrate more than a sexual difference. They are also indicative of a process of semantic derogation affecting the female terms. An analysis of the language used by men to discuss and describe women reveals something about male attitudes, fears, and prejudices concerning the female sex. Again and again in the history of the language, one finds that a perfectly innocent term designating a girl or woman may begin with totally neutral or even positive connotations, but that gradually acquires negative implications, at first perhaps only slightly disparaging, but after a period of time becoming abusive and ending as a sexual slur. Muthuri (husband) is a powerful, protective or skilful man; muka (wife) is a woman kept as a property of a man. A mundurume/njambi (a man) is a polished, courageous man of high social status. There is nothing wrong with calling a man a bachara (bachelor), but calling a woman a kiheti (spinster) is contemptuous. A single word

may behave differently in other societies as regards male and female. For instance in American English, at least, when you call a man a pro, you mean that he is experienced, competent and reliable; when you call a woman a pro, you mean she's a prostitute.

This process of words that refers to women acquiring demeaning or sexual connotations has been widely observed, and has been termed as semantic derogation. Similarly, in English language we have governor and governess, actor-actress, policeman-policewoman. In Oxford English Dictionary governor is explained as a man who exercises a sovereign authority in a colony, territory or state whereas for the feminine word governess, the first explanation is a chief nursemaid. In old English, these two words both refer to the chief member who has got considerable power as the executive of a political administrative unit, for example, Queen Elizabeth I was acknowledged to be the Supreme Majesty and governess of all persons. However, governess later changed to a woman who cares for small children when she is employed by their wealthy parent. Bachelor and Spinster all designate an unmarried adult. Spinster marked for females, seems to have acquired the insulting meaning of old maid referring to someone who is unable to find a husband; by implication they are too ugly or too fussy. Bachelor marked for males, by contrast, has the positive connotations of freedom and independence and still having all the choice of marrying or not. The examples cited above are all asymmetrical, and diminish women rather than men. All the male terms have retained their original positive meanings while female terms have frequently undergone a dramatic downhill slide ending more often than not with sexually debased meanings.

Feminist theorists aim to understand the nature of inequality and focus on gender politics, power relations and sexuality. Feminist political activists advocate for social, political, and economic equality between the sexes. They campaign on issues such as reproductive rights, domestic violence, maternity leave, equal pay, discrimination and sexual violence. It is the commitment to change that stimulates the feminist analysis and research of language. Feminist analysis is to explore the possibilities of using languages as an important means for reaching feminist political agenda, and they share a confidence in the power of language to help liberate women from oppressive circumstances and identities.

5.3 Personification and Imagery

Personification of inanimate objects arises from stereotyped notions of male and female characteristics. Objects which are strong or powerful are generally personified as male, while those which are weak, passive or receptive are personified as female. Thus the ihiga (rock) seen to be male while the ichoya (leaf) which is lighter and fragile than the rock is seen to be female. In common usage vehicles and mechanised objects are often personified. For instance itinga (tractor) are personified as males while ngari (small cars) as female. Thus statement like atwarithagia gitingatinga (drives a tractor) is always perceived to be a male driver even when the gender is not mentioned. However more objects of less value tend to be personified as female than male. Since

objects do not have gender, it is more appropriate to refer to them as 'it'. The use of animal imagery is just one example where the images of women are less positive from that of men, for example a man is a muruthi (lion), ndume (bull) while a woman is a gachau (heifer), gachui (chick). Thus a statement like araheirwo ndume (she delivered a baby boy) is quite common.

5.4 Sexism inherent in the morphology of the language

Sexism is also said to be engraved in the morphology of the language. In the English language, there has been gender marking practice in human agent nouns, which treat women and men differently. That is, naming practices for women and men are often asymmetrical. In linguistics, markedness refers to the way words are changed or added to give a special meaning. The unmarked choice is just the normal meaning. In Gikuyu language, the naming of male term is different from female for instance a man is referred to as muthuri and woman as mutumia. Kairitu (girl) kahii (boy), guka (grandfather), cucu (grandmother) mama (uncle) and tata (aunt). In English the male term is for the most part unmarked while the female term is marked. It is created by adding a bound morpheme to the male term or by combining the male term with a word referring to female. In English, derivational morphemes are mainly prefixes and suffixes. These affixes often change the part of the stem. The affixes thereby help us to identify relationships within words. The female term is seen as the marked term and the male as the unmarked one. A marked and unmarked term is a useful concept when analyzing sexism. It is a special kind of asymmetry. It is quite common in English. The base structure of nouns in English always seems to be the male form. The female form is always a derivative of the male form. This is an evidence of sexism in English. Often women's job titles have been derived from males job titles by adding bound morphemes (suffixes) such as -ette, -ess and -trix. Take for example lion the female form is lioness, in Gikuyu the male form of a lion is called muruthi while female form is muruthi wa gike (lioness). Also there is mwati (male sheep) and harika (female sheep) and the list goes on. In Gikuyu language a man can be ndagitari (a doctor), but a woman must often be ndagitari wa mutumia (a woman doctor). We are surprised when a professor or an engineer turns out to be a woman, or when a secretary or a model turns out to be a man. Fromkin et al (2007) however, noted that since the advent of feminist movement, that many marked female forms have been replaced by the male forms, which are used to refer to either sex. Thus women, as well as men, are authors, actors, poets, heroes, and heirs. Women however remain countesses, duchesses, and princesses, if they are among this group of female aristocrats. When sex-specific words must be used, one should attempt to maintain gender symmetry.

5.5 Sexism in Syntax

In Gikuyu language sexism is noted in the word order. Usually words denoting male sex are put in front of female sex. It is more natural to place man before woman, as in muthuri na mutumia (male and female), muthuriwe na mutumia wake (husband and wife), ithe na nyina (father and mother), muruwanyina na muarawanyina (brother and

sister), muriu na mwari (son and daughter). This word order not only reflects the belief that males are superior but that this superiority is also reflected in the structure of language.

5.6 Honorific/Use of Titles

Inequality is also implied for instance in cases where a woman's title is not mentioned but a man's is; where a woman is addressed simply by her first name but a man is addressed by his title, first name and surname; muthuri na mutumia wa kamau (Mr and mrs kamau) but never (or almost never) to mutumia na muthuri kamau (Mrs. and Mr. kamau). Other practices in Gikuyu language also create the impression that women deserve less respect or less serious consideration than men do, such as when endearments are used to address women in situations that do not justify such words. For example when a male is being introduced in Gikuyu language he is simply referred to by his name njambi ino itagwo chege (this is chege) this identifies the person as a male adult. The titles mutumia wa chege or muiritu wa chege (Mrs. Chege and Miss chege) however, not only identify the person addressed as a woman but also make known her marital status. The contrast between bachelor and the highly pejorative term kiheti (spinster), used to refer to persons who have never married, makes clear that a woman who has not been married is a lesser being than a male who "chooses" not to be married.

5.7 Use of Non-parallel Terms

There is asymmetric relationship existing in certain words in Gikuyu language. This is seen in words used to refer to males and females. An example of a locution that establishes not just male dominance but the subservience of women to men occurs in the old fashioned but still used phrase riu ni mawatwika muthuri na mutumia (you are now man and wife). This is both a bizarre expression because no one should go about pronouncing someone to be a man and establishes the woman in the subservient role of wife. There is an easy way to improve the language of wedding vows. One may simply use husband and wife. Notice though how odd sounding I pronounce you wife and husband is. The man must always come first. Other examples: ndagitari na mutumia wake (the doctor and his wife), mwalimu na muka (the teacher and his wife) but not vice versa. In the above examples, it is assumed that all doctors and teachers are male. The reality may be that the doctor or the teacher is female. In order to avoid sexist language, Males and females should be referred to in parallel terms such as: girls and boys, women and men, ladies and gentlemen, husband and wife, male and females. One should not also assume that male should come first, so alternate female and male, wives and husbands, women and men, girls and boys, mothers and fathers should be used.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

It has been shown that Gikuyu language is a sexist language. Thus the stereotype for a woman is everything bad while in the same circumstance, a man is always dignified. This shows the level at which the Gikuyu language has demeaned women. This leads to the conclusion that Gikuyu language is sexist: that is they represent or name 'the world from a masculine viewpoint and according to the stereotyped beliefs about the sexes. Although feminists tend to be the

only people fighting against sexism, this false ideology needs to be changed. People need to become more sociological in their thinking and realize this is a problem that we all should be working to fix. Many of us have never really taken the time to think about the effects of the language we use. How it can affect us or our position within society. Think about it for a minute and see if we are just succumbing to societal expectations or are we just more intelligent and more eager to promote change. The challenge to us, individuals, is to remedy this kind of problem in Gikuyu language. Both genders must be given exactly the same respect. All along, we are one and the same because we are all created by God in his own image and likeness.

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