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INVESTIGATING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GENDER LANGUAGE WITH A FOCUS ON ANAMBRA STATE, NIGERIA

By

Corresponding author: Marcel Afam Ezechukwu

Department of English Language and Literature Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

ABSTRACT: This study explores the relationship that exists between gender and language in Anambra State, Nigeria, with special attention on the Igbo language. Applying the combination of sociocultural and linguistic analysis, the researcher tends to examine how gender is encoded and negotiated through language in their day-to-day discourse, social institutions, and cultural norms. The researcher found out that the Igbo language reinforces and challenges traditional gender roles while reflecting on the complex and dynamic status of gender in Nigeria- Anambra State. This study will contribute to a more understanding of language as well as gender within non-Western contexts, and together highlight the significance of culturally sensitive approaches towards language and gender study. The implications of this study are necessary for teaching language, developing culture and promoting gender sensitive in Nigeria- Anambra in particular.

KEYWORDS: Language and Gender, Igbo Language, Gendered Language Use, Gender Stereotypes, Igbo Culture.

INTRODUCTION

In many African cultures, including Anambra State language is a vital aspect of identity, community, and social relationships. Language and gender are inseparably linked in such a way that language plays an important function in perpetuating and constructing societal behaviours as regards gender. In Africa- Anambra State in particular where language and culture are strongly interrelated, of which their relationship is complex and multifaceted. Africa is a continent with linguistic and cultural diversity that offers a rich environment for exploring the intricate dynamics between gender and language. Gender is often encoded in language through several means thus:

- Gender- infected vocabulary
- Gender pronouns and nouns
- Gender idioms and proverbs

In spite of the importance of language, research on this area-language and gender in African contexts is still not enough with a significant lacuna in our understanding of how gender is signified and negotiated through language. Most of the existing research focus on other languages and cultures with few exploring the complex ways in which African languages encode and negotiate gender. In Anambra State under study, which is in the south eastern part of Nigeria, the predominantly spoken language is Igbo language. Igbo language

is a gendered language with gender discriminations that are obvious in different linguistic features like nouns, pronouns and verbs which vary in masculine and feminine forms. The target of this research is to contribute and fill the observed existing gap by exposing the signification of gender in the Igbo language spoken in Anambra. The Igbo language is a Niger-Congo language spoken by many people in the southern part of Nigeria. The Igbos in this region have a very rich cultural heritage and complex gender dynamics. Through examining the linguistic and sociocultural mechanisms that shape gender expression and views in Igboland, the researcher wants to uncover the ways in which language reinforces and challenges traditional gender roles in Igbo culture.

Our examination will focus on linguistic and sociocultural theories with empirical data from textual analysis and observations to enable the researcher to provide a nuanced full understanding of the complex dynamics between language and gender in Anambra State. Furthermore, we will explore the way language and culture construct and negotiate gender identity, roles and relationships together with how these constructions shape and reflect social behaviours towards gender.

We hope to shed light also on the ways in which language shapes and reflects gender identity, roles, and also contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of gender in African culture.

Conceptual Framework

Gendered Language

Gendered language refers to the ways in which language use reflects and reinforces societal notions of gender that often perpetuate inequalities and stereotypes Lak off (1975:45) asserts.

This is a phenomenon that affects our communication and perception across contexts and domains. It is essential to study and understand it from various viewpoints and use it properly and effectively. Gendered language appears in various disciplines such as linguistics, psychology, sociology, communication, education and media studies.

Gendered language can be found in many languages especially those with grammatical

gender, such as, French, Spanish, Arabic and African languages. In these languages, nouns and pronouns have a marked gender-masculine and feminine, and other parts of speech like adjectives, verbs, and articles must agree with the gender of the noun or pronoun they modify. For instance, in Spanish teacher is 'profesora' for feminine gender and 'profesor' for masculine gender in Anambra; 'Oke' stands for masculine gender while 'nwnye' stands for feminine gender. The meaning is that speakers of these languages have to think of gender eachtime they use a noun or a pronoun, which can make them more aware of gender differences and similarities as posited by Newman et al (2008:211-236).

Gendered language however is not limited to grammatical gender; it cuts across languages that do not have grammatical gender like English. In such languages, gendered language can be expressed through other means like word choice, tone, style, or context. For example, in English, some words are considered more masculine or feminine in nature than others. For instance, strong or weak, leader or follower, rational or emotional. Some words are equally used differently for men and women, for instance; 'bossy' or 'assertive', 'nagging' or 'persistent'. Moreover, some topics are considered more appropriate, or interesting for men or women like, 'sports' or 'fashion', 'politics' or 'gossip', 'science' or 'art' in the view of Flaherty, (2001: 102).

It is also capable of affecting our communication and perception across contexts and domains-gendered language can also affect how we communicate our identity and personality such as, some people may use more masculine or feminine words to express their self-confidence or self-doubt, dominance or submissiveness, competence or incompetence. Gendered language can affect how we perceive others and their abilities. For example, some people may judge others based on their use of masculine or feminine words and assume that they are more or less intelligent, capable, trustworthy, likable and otherwise. It can affect how we interact in different settings, like, some people may use more masculine or feminine words to adapt to different audiences and expectations like in a formal setting, in academic

or professional domains, public or private spheres, or life as opined Gygax et al (2019b: 70).

Types of Gendered Language

1. Gender-specific language: This language reinforces traditional gender roles like using “he” as the default pronoun as pointed out by Spender, (1980:78).
2. Sexist language: Language that perpetuates harmful stereotypes or biases against individuals based on their sex and/ or gender, as observed by Kramarae (1981:23).
3. Gender- neutral language: Cameron (1992:12) is of the opinion that it is a language that avoids gendered assumptions or biases primarily inclusivity and equality.

Gender Stereotypes

Gender stereotyping is considered to be a significant issue obstructing the career progressions of women in management. The continuation of minimal representation and participation of women in top-level management positions is a shift in a positive direction. Gender stereotyping persists despite the provision of equal opportunities in workplaces. Though an improvement has been recorded with an increasing number of women acquiring various management positions in the workplace, as observed by Schain (1973). The think manager, think male attitude is still very obvious among men. However, think manager, think male association is attended in the case of successful companies and think crises think female in the case of unsuccessful companies. It is a hard knot that seems difficult to crack in African culture, Anambra under study. Examples of gender stereotypes in Igbo culture are

- ‘Di okpara’ syndrome: Eldest sons are expected to inherit family property and carry on the family name.
- Women’s roles are limited to domesticity: Women are often expected to prioritize household duties over education or career.
- Men are sole decision-makers: Women’s opinion in Igbo culture may be disregarded or undervalued.

- Emotional expression: Men are discouraged from showing emotions, while women are expected to be emotionally expressive.

Impact of Gender Stereotypes

- Limited opportunities: Women’s pursuits of career choices and education are restricted.
- Perpetuates inequality: Patriarchal systems and gender-based violence are reinforced.
- Affect mental health: Gender stereotypes lead to anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem.
- Influences relationships: It creates unrealistic expectations and conflicts.

Family Gender Stereotype

The strongest gendered stereotype in Africa is related to viewing the role of men as the head-head of the family, while women are the opposite, the owners of properties-land and house, which women are not excluded from as well as the household primary breadwinner. Furthermore, attitude, that men should make the most important decisions in the family, women should be responsible for the health of all the members, and especially children. Again, that woman must obtain permission from the/her husband and parent- in-law to continue her studies or go to work or even use the family budget for her personal needs.

In job and employment opportunity, the same gender stereotype has been identified. The most prevailing views are that men should dedicate themselves to building a career and earning money for the family, work full time while women are protected inside the house as house keepers, and not allowed to go for a job hunt.

Igbo Culture

Igbo culture, originating from the southeastern part of Nigeria, is a complex and dynamic phenomenon that has garnered significant scholarly attention as viewed by Isichei (1976) and Achebe (1958). This overview provides an examination of Igbo cultural dynamics, exploring its Historical, social, and symbolic contexts.

Pre-colonial Igbo society was characterized by decentralized political structures, with

autonomous villages and clans, said Isichei, (1976:12). The British colonial period then introduced significant changes, Christianity and western education as posited by Achebe, (1958:45). Igbo society is organized around kinship ties, with extended family networks playing a vital role, Uchendu said (1965:23). Age grades, and The title-taking system, reinforce social hierarchy and authority, Ottenberg (1959:15).

Igbo culture is replete with symbolic meanings, as evident in its art, literature, and mythology, (Okpewho 1983:10) The concept of “chi” and ‘ikenga’ shows between humans and the divine, according to Metuh (1991:56).

Igbo Language

Igbo is also known and called the Igbo language, which is a Niger-Congo language spoken by the Igbo people of the southeastern part of Nigeria, as Green and Igwe (2012:12) observed. It has approximately thirty million speakers, and is the most widely spoken language in Africa as seen in Ethnologue, (2022).

The Igbo language has a complex phonological system ranging from:

- Tonal system which Uchechukwu, (2015:45) sees as high and low tone.
- Consonant and vowel sounds : The Igbo language is made up of thirty-two consonant sounds and eight vowel sounds, according to Osuji, (2013:78).
- Verb conjugation: Igbo verbs change according to tense, aspect, and mood, said Uchechukwu, (2015:56).
- In the words of Emenajo, (2014:123), the Igbo language uses suffixes and prefixes to form words.
- Osuji, (2013:90) pointed out that the Igbo language has a syntactically subject-verb-object word order.
- Emenajo also observed that it has complex sentence structures- relative clauses and serial verb constructions (2014:145).

In its sociolinguistic context, Igbo language plays an important role in Igbo culture and identity according to Achebe (1958:45). Though threatened as seen by Obafemi by language shift towards English and Nigerian

Pidgin (NP) (2018:123). It has several dialects, like:

- Standard Igbo
 - Owerri Igbo
 - Onitsha Igbo
 - Ngwa Igbo
- Emenajo, (2014:56).

Igbo language is taught in schools, and efforts are being made to promote its full use in various fields like:

- Education, Obafemi, (2018:145),
- Media and Literature, Achebe, (1958:12) and
- Government and official contexts, Green and Igwe, (2012:78).

This language is a rich and complex language with unique structural features and sociolinguistic significance, which efforts to promote and document are essential for the preservation of Igbo culture and identity.

Conclusion

The researcher concludes that language plays a very important role in shaping and reflecting gender norms, roles, and relationships in Anambra State, Nigeria. The Igbo language, with its complex gendered nuances, reinforces and challenges traditional gender stereotypes, highlighting the dynamic nature of gender in Igbo culture.

Also, the findings have important implications for language teaching, gender-sensitive programming, and cultural development in Anambra State. Recognising and understanding the complex ways in which language constructs gender, attention will be given more towards inclusive and equitable language practices that promote gender equality and fight harmful gender strategies.

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