

## THE INTERFACE: LANGUAGE, GENDER AND POWER

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**ABSTRACT:** Language, gender and power are major concepts in many academic disciplines. These concepts are expressed in different ways by different societies. The interface of these concepts is the focal point of this paper. The paper brings to fore how gender affects language use in the society and how power is demonstrated using language citing examples from African and Western context. The study reveals that, language is used to construct gender in that, we use language to demonstrate and convey what society anticipates from both sexes and power is demonstrated and achieved through language.

**KEYWORDS:** Language, Gender, Power, Interface

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Studies on the connection between language, gender and power is an interdisciplinary field which has come to the forefront in applied linguistics, linguistic anthropology, gender studies, linguistics, sociolinguistics and its related studies. Many linguists, sociolinguist, sociologist, psychologist and many more have explored the interaction between these concepts. Biological difference between men and women (sex) is mostly associated with gender (what is socially expected from a male or female). However, while sex is naturally given, gender is constructed by societal norms, roles etc. The interface between language, gender and power is closely related to social attitudes. Men and women are expected to be socially different, in that society provides different social roles for them and expects different behaviour patterns from them. Societal perception of these different roles and behaviour patterns expected from men and women, empowers some, while disempowering others. One way of enacting power is to control the context of a speech situation which involves language used and the people involved (gender). Language is used to construct gender in that we use language to highlight and carry what society expects from both sexes. The article explores the interaction between language, gender and power with illustrations from African and Western context.

## 2. EARLIER STUDIES RELATED TO LANGUAGE, GENDER AND POWER

Lakoff posits the relationship between language, gender and power. She argued that women speak differently from men and that, women's language or way of speaking express powerlessness. She asserted that women's way of speaking reflects and produce a subordinate position in society. According to her, women's language is rife,

with devices as mitigators (example; sort of, I think) and inessential qualifiers (really happy, so beautiful). She is of the view that language is fundamental to gender inequality and this can be found in the way in which language is used about women and the way women used language. The way society expects women to speak makes women speech uncertain, powerless and insignificant. These societal prescribed speeches disqualify women from position of power and authority. With that, language becomes a tool of oppression, which is imposed on women by societal norms and thus, keeps women in their place. Lakoff claims women and men talk differently and the differences in their speech are the support of the male dominance. Her claim brought about the **differences** and **dominant** approaches (Lakoff, 1975).

### 3. THE DOMINANCE AND DIFFERENCES APPROACHES

Lakoff claims were viewed in two different and even conflicting theories. Two broad classes of explanations for gender, language and power effects have been presented as: *dominance theories and difference theories*.

#### 3.1. DOMINANCE APPROACH

Robin Lakoff 1975 proposed the Dominance approach stating that men are naturally more dominant than women mainly through speech patterns or behaviour towards or around women. In her other theories of Tag questions, however, the dominance approach also shows that women act less dominant around men, in that, women use tag questions more than men not only for politeness but uncertain whether they are correct and needed a male opinion to ascertain their view points. Women are known of using more tag questions than men since men naturally act dominant around the women. Consequently, to make the women conversation viable, she requires a male reassurance or idea. The difference in style of speech between the two sexes results from male supremacy and possibly an effect of patriarchy.

According to the dominance theories, men and women inhabit the same cultural and linguistic world, in which power and status are distributed unequally, and are expressed by linguistic as well as other cultural markers. In principle, women and men have access to the same set of linguistic and conversational devices and use them for the same purposes. Apparent differences in usage reflect differences in status and in goals. Analysis related with dominance framework usually argue that differences between women and men's speech arise because of male dominance over women and persist in order to keep women subordinated to men

Associated with the dominance framework were works like Julia Penelope (1990) *speaking freely: unlearning the lies of the father's tongues* and scholars such as Dale Spender, Don Zimmerman and Candace West.

#### 3.2. DIFFERENCES APPROACH

Deborah Tannen is well known to the Difference approach. She publicised that male and female individuals' lifestyles are often presented as being different cultures. Thus, men and women inhabit different cultural (and therefore linguistic) worlds.

“Even if they grow up in the same neighbourhood, on the same block, or in the same house, girls and boys grow up in different worlds of words. Others talk to them differently and expect and accept different ways of talking from them” (Tannen, 1990, p.20). She categorised this theory into;

- **Status verses Support** – men through their speech gain status and are seen as more powerful and dominant in society while women use their speech to comfort and support others.
- **Advices verses Understanding** – whereas, men will try to find a solution to the problem, women seek to find comfort and sympathy for their problems.
- **Information verses Feeling** – men's conversation is message-oriented communicating or taking information, whereas, women conversation strive to build relationships and strengthens social links.
- **Orders verses Proposals** – Men like to use direct imperatives (example; “shut the door”) when communicating. However, Women conversations are full of super polite forms (example; “would you mind if ...?”).
- **Conflict verses Compromise** – While, men would not mind having conflict to show their power, most women try to avoid conflict as much as possible and try to compromise situations.
- **Independence verses Intimacy**– according to the theory, men want to be independence whereas, women like to seek intimacy in general.

Tannen advocates that, difference is an approach of equality and the varying communicative styles of men and women is as a result of differentiating men and women as belonging to different 'sub-cultures' as they have been socialised to do so since childhood. Thus, gender differences in language is associated to cultural differences, comparing conversational goals, she argues that men tend to use a "report style", aiming to communicate factual information, whereas women more often use a "rapport style", which is more concerned with building and maintaining relationships.

#### 4.EXPLANATION OF CONCEPTS

##### 4.1. Language

Over the years, Scholars all over the world have given language several definitions and explanations. Some of them are; “Language is the expression of ideas by means of speech-sounds combined into words. Words are combined into sentences, this combination answering to that of ideas into thoughts.” (Henry Sweet, an English phonetician and language scholar) “A language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols



by means of which a social group cooperates” Bernard Bloch and George L. Trager, American linguists).

(<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/329791/language>, 29/04/2019).

Generally, Language is a system by which human beings communicate ideas either in speech or in writing. It is a body of words and the systems for their use common to a people who are in the same community or nation, the same geographical area, or the same cultural tradition. The word "language" has two meanings: language as a **general concept** and "a language" **a specific linguistic system**. Language as a general concept could be explained as a mental faculty, organ or instinct, a formal symbolic system and a tool for communication. ‘When described as a system of symbolic communication, language is traditionally seen as consisting of three parts: signs, meanings and a code connecting signs with their meanings’. Language as a specific linguistic system are dedicated to specific languages or specific language families (e.g. German Studies, English language studies, etc.). These specific programs are chiefly interested in describing the unique properties of a given language or language family and the contingencies of its history. The scientific study of language is called linguistics.

## 4.2. Gender

Gender relates to the different roles and responsibilities that society assigns to the two sexes. The definition of gender varies from discipline to discipline. While others interchange it with sex some also separate the two concepts. Legal specialists and literary analysts view gender as a person’s biological sex. However, social scientists also associate ‘gender’ with non-biological factors. Rothwell views sex as biological, that is male and female and gender as ‘social role behaviour (feminine-masculine) (Rothwell, 2000, p. 36).

Gender is the manifestation of what culture makes out of the “raw materials” of the biological sexes.’ In the studies of ethnography of speaking, “gender” refers to sociocultural and psychological, shaping, patterning and evaluating of female and male behaviour. For the purpose of this study gender is taken from ethnographic perspective.

Unlike sex differentiation that signifies biological differences between males and females, there are gender differentiations or stratification which is briefly explained below:

### 4.2.1. Gender Stratification

Gender stratification is a system whereby the positions occupied by men and women are associated with different amounts of income, prestige, agriculture, education, politics etc. Gender roles are specified in most cultures and may differ from society to society. For instance, most societies based their gender stratification on the warrior nature of men in the past. Men in societies used their warrior and economic roles to reinforce the social and economic oppression on women. An example of

stratified society is Javanese. This stratification is exhibited mostly in the public political realms where men are usually in this realm while women, on the other hand, engage in economic chores in the home. This kind of stratification is also predominant in most African countries.

However, since society is dynamic, gender system as flexible also changes with time and space. Hence, the more advance and developed a society is the narrower and more neutralised is its gender stratification.

### 4.3. Power

Power refers to the process of having the authority, resources and the ability to control and determine the living conditions of people based on their socio-cultural ideology. Moore and Hendry describe power as ‘...the force in society that gets things done, and by studying it, we can identify who controls what, and for whose benefit’. (Moore & Hendry, 1982, p.127).

Power can be enforced through individual such as Judges, Police officers and politicians whose job give them the right to affect other people’s live. Again, various roles people play in the society can give them power. For instance, teachers, employers and parents have powers as a result of their roles they play in the society to control their subordinates. Thomas and Wareing classified such power as ‘personal power’. (Thomas & Wareing, 2003, p.11).

## 4.4. THE INTERFACE BETWEEN LANGUAGE, GENDER AND POWER

### 4.4.1. LANGUAGE AND GENDER

The link between language and gender is not ‘natural’ but culturally constructed (Foley 1997). This is so because societies associate certain forms of language for the different sexes(male/female). A lot of research concerning male and female speech proved that certain linguistic features are associated to either men or women only (Lakoff 1975; Romaine 1994).

Generally, in most societies’ women are expected to speak more formally and more politely than men. Femaleness is associated with respectability, gentility and high cultured, contrary to manliness which is associated with ‘toughness’ and direct speech. These behaviours that society expects from the male and female predetermine their choice of words (language).

Many scholars have described women’s speech as being different from that of men. Biologically, females have certain characteristics which are different from men. Females weigh less, mature quickly, live longer, and are less strong and less muscles than males. Again, the voice quality of the various sexes differs. Women have thinner vocal cords while men have thicker vocal cords. As a result, there are differences in voice quality as women have high pitches and men have low pitches.

However, these differences again, may have social factor. Wardhaugh affirms this by saying that ‘women may live longer than men because of the different roles

they play in the society and the different jobs they tend to fill' (Wardhaugh 1992, p. 303).

The different voice quality may also be how the society expects them to sound as stated earlier. Various investigations done on how men and women use language especially in a conversation show that:

- Men conversations sentence more on business, politics, legal matters, taxes and sports. Whiles women talk about social life, books, food and drinks, life's troubles and lifestyles.
- Men speak forcefully whiles female's speech is less forcefully.
- Men focus talks on competition, teasing, aggression, take initiative in conversation and tend to explain things to women. Men interrupt, challenge, ignore more and try to control in conversations.
- Women talk on feelings, affiliation with home and family or others, they ask more questions than men and tend to apologize more than men. They dislike domination in conversation.
- Women used more question tags and hypercorrection pronunciations and grammar. Certain clichés such as "*men never listen*" and "*women find it easier to talk about their feelings*" support the above findings.

Further investigations show that there are phonological, phonetics, morphological, syntactic and pragmatics (linguistics) differences in the speech of male and female. This speech differences have been noted in variety of languages.

For instance, in Gross Ventre, an Ameridian language of the North East United States, women have palatalized velar stops where men have palatalized dental stops. An example is '*bread*' which females pronounce it as '*kjatsa*' whiles males *pronounce* it as *sdjatsa*.

Moreover, Yukaghir a North East Asian language, women and children used /ts/ and /dz/ whereas men have /tj/ and /dj/. (Wardhaugh, 1992)

**Syntactically**, in terms choice of words, Japanese women use '*ne*' at the end of sentence when they speak.

English, French, Latin, Greek, Russian, Spanish and many more languages make sex distinction through their pronominal systems. For example, '*he*' and '*she*' in English, '*le*' and '*la*' in French, '*hun*' and '*han*' in Norwegian language.

Nevertheless, among the Akan's gender distinction exists between male and female personal names. For example, a male child born on Friday in Akan will be called '*Kofi*' whiles a female child born on the same Friday will be called '*Afia*'.

With the family names, a lot of male names also have their corresponding female names in most Ghanaian societies. For example, in Akan by attaching the suffix *-waa*, *-maa*, *-bea*, or *-ba* to the male name we have its female counterpart.



Few examples are illustrated below:

Table 1: **AKAN MALE NAMES WITH IT'S FEMALE COUNTERPART**

Male(name)	Female (name)
Ampofo	Ampofowaa
Kyei	Kyeiwaa
Antwi	Antwiwaa
Ado	Adobea
Ofei	Ofeibea

Source: Author’s construct (NB: *the author is a native speaker she used her intuition and interactions with expert opinion to generate this table*).

These distinctions of names can also be seen in many western countries as well. For example, Alexander/Alexandra, Andrew/Andrea, Charlie/Charlotte, Felix/Felicity etc.

The interface between language and gender is also seen in our in African setting particularly, in Ghanaian society certain diction may be acceptable for male but may not be appropriate for female. Profanity does not deem suitable for females but may be not be frowned upon when same profane words are uttered by their male counterpart. Ghanaian Pidgin English according to many researches is male dominated in Ghana. (Huber, 1999).

Furthermore, archaism, proverbs and many figurative devices are used by more men than women. Another instance is in Dyirbal, certain variety may be a taboo to women whiles to the men it is not. In Ghanaian context certain important communicative situations and performances where aspects of oral literature and performance are gender sensitive. The following table illustrates some oral genres in Akan society and their performers.

**Table 2: SOME AKAN ORAL GENRES WITH THEIR SPECIFIC PERFORMERS.**

ORAL GENRE	PERFORMERS
Funeral Dirge	Women.
Marriage Contracts	Women
Folksongs	Women
<i>Amannebo</i> ‘recounting one’s missions’ example after travelling or journey.	Men
Orator or linguist ( <i>‘ɔkyeame’</i> )	Men

Source: Author's construct (NB: the *author is a native speaker she used her intuition and interactions with expert opinions to generate this table*).

The different speech styles, distinction in names, different choice of words and gender sensitive performances of some genre among male and female across society are due to the role the various societies assigned to the different sexes and expect them to behave. The various roles allocated by the society to the different sexes are executed using language because, it is through language (words, sayings, songs, jokes, stories and poetry etc.) that we construct gender. Hence, the connection between language and gender.

#### 4.4.2. LANGUAGE AND POWER

Power is often demonstrated through language; it can also be achieved through language. Political power for instance, exists by way of language, through speeches and debates. Laws are also codified and discussed in language; individuals also give orders through language. This form of power being implemented through language is not only in the public sphere but also in individual homes (Thomas & Wareing, 2003, p. 311).

Societies have preserved certain roles in their oral and traditional customs, institutional powers and predetermined gender related roles and norms. This gender-based systems seek to control both sexes. As a result, there are institutional conflicts, thus, the control of institutional power about who will get to speak and with what effect, where can the different sexes speak and how. The control of representations occurs in social, institutions and in verbal interaction, how these are displayed, communicated and reproduced equally are sources of social power. Coulmas affirms this by saying that, 'Sex variation in language behaviour is seen as expressing and reinforcing power differentials. (Coulmas 2005, p.39).

In most societies 'men tend to control and dominate women while women struggle to emancipate. These '**dominance**' and '**emancipation**' are observed in our daily activities, jobs, naming, proverbs, idioms etc. which are all expressed using language. Therefore, the more power you have, the more language you can use.

In most Ghanaian societies, key political and traditional portfolios that are strictly related to communicative functions are usually **male-dominated**. These include positions of chiefs, lineage head, counsellors, diplomats, chiefs spoke person (linguist-*ɔkyeame*), master drummers of the talking drums and the arbitrators of the chiefs' courts. There is no doubt that the verbal wit of women is directly or indirectly limited.

In addition, to demonstrate that certain **positions or jobs** are male dominant and controlled by men in most societies, women holding such positions are often described reemphasising their feminine forms in terms of men. For example, a woman who is a



judge, chairs a program or is a doctor would be referred to mostly in our daily speeches or conversation as female *judge, madam chairman, lady doctor* respectively.

Another context in which power and gender interacts is naming, in Akan for example, the suffix ‘*bea*’ or ‘*wa*’ meaning ‘*small*’ which is attached to male names to form its female counterpart denote the **diminutive** form of female names. Examples. *Asante-Asantewaa, Opare -Oparebea*, etc (see table 1 above for more examples).

Furthermore, power in terms of dominance is seen in naming after marriage, women tends to take their husband’s names in addition to their names after marriage just as children are given their fathers’ names in addition to their first names. Some men sometimes address their spouse or lovers ‘*baby*’ signalling a comparatively small or immature of its kind, a sign of being weak or pampered or being overprotective towards. Similarly, the marital status of a woman is easily known with ‘miss’ or ‘Mrs’ attached to her name but that of a man is not easily detected. ‘Mr.’ is used for both married and unmarried man (i.e. Any grown man, marital status irrelevant). Have you wondered why men don’t have titles that indicate their marital status?

Generally, women do not engage in profanities and obscenities as men do. There are figurative uses to show that women should be virginal, inexperienced, untried, and fresh in the world. Examples are found in expressions such as *maiden voyage, maiden speech, maiden flight* which refer to the first occasion or event of a kind. Most of these manifestations reveal the relationship between power and gender and the struggle of dominance and emancipation.

In Ghanaian community especially in Akan, certain proverbs, idioms or adage such as *a woman sells garden eggs, but she does not sell gun powder* portrays male dominance and power.

The following Akan proverbs further illustrate how different power and societal roles could be distributed to male and female through the use of language

1. “*ɔbaa tɔ tuo a , etwere barima dan mu.*”

Woman buy gun CONJ stand man room inside.

“When a woman buys a gun, it is kept in the man’s room”.

2. *ɔ-baa ye turo mu nhwiren ;ne kunu ye ne ban*

SG-woman is garden inside flower CONJ. husband is 1SG.OBJ. fence.

‘A woman is a flower in a garden; her husband is the fence’

3. *Akokɔbedeε n –nyi n’ano wɔ badwam.*”

Hen NEG-remove POSS mouth there durbar grounds

“The hen does not talk at the durbar grounds”

4. *Akokɔbere nim adekyee nso ɔ-hwɛ akokɔnini ano.*  
Hen knows morning CONJ SG. look cock mouth.

‘The hen knows that it is dawn, but it looks up to the mouth of the rooster to crow’

5. *ɔ-baa kwasea na ɔ-kɔ awareɛ a ɔ-nya adeɛ.*  
SG.woman foolish that SG-go marriage CONJ 3SG-get something  
‘A foolish woman gets ‘something ‘in marriage’.  
(Appiah et al 2008).

These wise sayings restrict the performances and speeches of women and make them submissive to males. The Proverb are sources of social norms and values as well as an embodiment of culture and tradition in Akan. Proverbs 3 and 4 above portray how society expects woman to be silent, calm, listen but not to talk. In the context of *proverbs 1, 2 and 5* above women are expected to be submissive while men dominate and protect them.

Silence is observed by women to indicate their subordinate status. Wives are expected to keep mute in front of their husbands. A woman who talks too much is not admired by Akan societies. She is often nicknamed *ɔbaa akokɔnini* ‘a woman rooster’ or sometimes a witch because the societal conventional wisdom in proverbs reinforces these negative stereotypes.

This culture of women remaining silence is not peculiar to only Akans it also happens in some culture like Birifor of Northern Ghana where the lips of women were perforated to prevent them from talking .Among the Auracaian of Chile an idle woman is supposed to keep quiet in the presence of the husband. The new bride in entering the husband’s house is supposed to face the wall and can only talk after several months.

The interface of language gender and power is also portrayed in the Christian doctrine. Women are supposed to listen rather than being heard. The Apostle Paul wrote ‘let a woman learn silence with all submissiveness. I will permit no woman to teach or to have authority over man, she is to keep silent’. (1 Timothy 2:11-12). The diverse illustrations portray that power influences language which is performed by the different sexes and the more power one has the greater its use of language.

Previous researches on language, gender and power addressed the issue of ‘women’s language’ either using linguistic features or social norms. These features were believed to be tied to women’s subordinate status and made women seem as if they were tentative, hesitant, trivial and lacking in authority. Until recently, the speech of women was ignored, because women were devalued, so were their language. The stereotype of women’s speech is that it is more polite than men. Lakkoff 1975, identified the following features as ‘Women's language’ which is associated with women’s greater politeness.

- Hedges, e.g. sort of; kind of, I guess;

- (Super) polite forms e.g. would you please...I'd really appreciate it if...
- Tag questions;
- Speaking in italics, e.g. emphatic so and very, intonational language;
- Empty adjectives, e.g. charming, sweet, adorable;
- Hypercorrect grammar and pronunciation;
- Lack of a sense of humour e.g. poor at telling jokes;
- Direct quotations, e.g. "Vera said that he said..."

With these features, Lakoff (1975) and many researchers believe that women's language which is associated with greater politeness render their language the "language of powerlessness". Brown and Levinson (1987) states that the level of politeness is expected from 'inferiors to superiors' this rendered women speech as inferior.

We deduce that the difference between these concepts is as a result of culture and not so much of a linguistic problem. It means that men and women are expected by society to have different interests and roles, hold different types of conversation and react differently in same or different situations. Although, access to power and influence are mostly linked to education, social class and regional origin, gender also plays a vital role in relation to language variation and power. Women and men are expected by the society to fill or perform distinctive roles and are mostly brought up differently. In other words, interface in language, gender and power may be social in origin rather than linguistic.

### **5. Current Trends and Neutralisation of Gender, Language and Power**

Modernisation and changes in people's way of life have resulted in changes in the use of language and power sharing by the different sexes (gender). With literacy and modernisation, the norm of gender inequity has decreased. There are a lot of top positioned jobs such as presidents, prime ministers, lecturers, lawyers, judges, parliamentarian, police officers, commentators, analysts and media practitioners etc. which are occupied by women. In African, on the 25<sup>th</sup> of October, 2018, Sahle-Work Zewde was elected president unanimously by members of the Federal Parliamentary Assembly in Ethiopia to be the first woman to hold the office of presidency in Ethiopia, other African countries with women as their leaders include, Namibia from 2015 had Saara Kuugongelwa-Amadhila, Mali from 2011 had Cissé Mariam Kaïdama Sidibé. More women leaders in the Western world include; Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany, Helle Thorning-Schmidt, Prime Minister of Denmark, Dilma Rousseff, President of Brazil, not to mention but a few. This changes in roles as women being leaders empowers women and thus, affects their language. Consequently, these women leaders use language as a way to construct their power and as a manner to maintain it. Most languages are evolving according to the changes in societal norms and values,



for instance, in English most gendered words are being replaced with new vocabulary, For example;

- Early man is now Early human
- Salesman can refer to as Salesperson
- Common man becomes Ordinary person
- Chairman is recently addressed as Chairperson
- mailman is currently called letter carrier
- firemen is now referred to fire fighters
- Steward or stewardess the gender-centric word is now replaced with a gender-neutral term, flight attendant.

Again, the traditional women's courtesy titles "Miss" (single woman or girl) or "Mrs." (married woman) is now "Ms." (grown woman, marital status undetermined) also, to avoid gender biasness, words like her/him, his / her, he /she is now common to neutralize gender.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Language itself may not be anti- woman (sexist), men and women use language to achieve certain sociocultural, political, economic and religious purposes as society expects from each of them. There is a relationship between language, gender and power. Men and women use language as means to construct their power and to maintain it. Power may be exercised through coercive (force) means but it can also be established or maintain mainly using language or discourse, thus, public discourse (the media), or private discourse. Gender relations are basically power relations and hence power is demonstrated and achieved through language.

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