

**LANGUAGE VARIATION IN RELATION TO GENDER AS A
SOCIAL FACTOR**

BY

**OHA OGECHUKWU EMILIA
1011109053**

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SOKOTO, NIGERIA.**

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CERTIFICATION

This research has been duly supervised and approved as having met up with the requirements for the award of a Bachelor of Arts (B.A Hons) Degree in Linguistics, Department of Modern European Languages and Linguistics, Faculty of Arts and Islamic Studies, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto.

Mal. Garba Ibrahim
(Project Supervisor)

Date

Dr. Aminu Mohammad Mode
(Head of Department)

Date

External Supervisor

Date

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my lovely parents, late Mr. Oha Louis and his lovely wife Mrs. Oha Benedeth, to my lovely siblings, my guardian Mr. Orji Edwin Chiekpezie.

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ABSTRACTS

This research is designed to examine language variation in relation to gender as a social factor, the thrust of this study is a sociolinguistic analysis of gender on language use. The research through its data that encompasses various languages has proved beyond every doubt the existence of gender variation in language use.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND GENERAL BACKGROUND

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntary produced symbols (Sapir, 1921:8). David crystal, (1989:252) further affirms that language is referred to as human a vocal noise or the graphic representation of this noise in writing used systematically and conventionally by a community for purpose of communication. Generally speaking language is a basic tool of socio-cultural communication; it specifically deals with the human capacity for using and acquiring complex systems of communication (Bloomfield 1914).

Language and gender is an area of study within socio-linguistics, applied linguistics and related fields that investigate varieties of speech associated

with a particular gender of social norms. A variety of speech or sociolect associated with a particular gender is sometimes called “genderlect” (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia). Language and gender basically explores two basic issues which are the representations of gender in language and the conversational characteristics of men and women. Cross-linguistic examinations have revealed a number of key areas of grammar and vocabulary where gender is displayed or indicated in various ways, other studies have identified symmetric male-female difference in many languages, these ranges from differences in vocabulary, difference in linguistic forms e.g. Phonology, morphology and syntax, to difference communication styles, politeness and directness in language.

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Sociolinguistics variation is the study of the way language varies and changes in community of speakers and concentrates on the interaction of social factors such as a speaker’s gender, age, ethnicity etc. and linguistic

structure such as sounds, words, intonation feature, grammatical structure etc.

The study of sociolinguistic variation has its roots in dialectology, emerging in the 1960s partly as a result of inadequate methods in earlier approaches to the study of dialect and partly as a reaction to Chomsky's generative programme.

Between the speakers of any language there is a variation in the way they use the language. This variation is seen through linguistic differences in terms of phonetics and grammar. There might be only slight variations between forms of languages such as minor pronunciation of words or a slight change of grammatical structure that do not inhibit inter group communication (Sil 2015).

Studies of language variation and its correlation with sociological factors such as Williams Labov's (1963) papers "The Social Motivation of a Sound Change", led to the foundation of sociolinguistics as a subfield of

linguistics. Although contemporary sociolinguistics includes other topics, language variation and change remain an important issue at the heart of the field.

An important aspect of sociolinguistics variation is language variation in relation to gender. The study of gender and language in sociolinguistics and gender studies is often said to have begun with Robin Lakoffs (1975) ‘Language and Woman’s Place, as well as some earlier studies by Lakoff, the study of language and gender has developed greatly since 1970s. Prominent scholars include Deborah Cameron (2002), Penelope Eckert (1998), Janet Holmes (2006), Deborah Tannen (1994) and others.

1.2 OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

1. To examine language variation in relation to gender.
2. To analyze the visibility of the variation in the use of language of males and females.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is clearly important as it evaluates the variation of language as it concerns gender in sociolinguistics.

1.4 SCOPE AND LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

This research will be confined within the realm of language variation in sociolinguistics as regards to how male and female use of language varies.

1.5 DEFINITION OF TERMS

The major terms to be used in this research work are **Language, Variation and Gender.**

According to Merriam–Webster dictionary “**Language** is the system of words or signs that people use to express thoughts and feelings to each other. According to wikitionary. org. “**Language** is a body of words and set of method of human communication, either spoken or written consisting of the use of words in a structured and conventional way.”

Variation according to dictionary.com is defined as the act, process or accident of varying in condition, character or degree.” Merriam–website dictionary defines **variation** as “a change in the form, position, condition, or amount of something.’ According to wikitionary.com **variation** is defined as the act of varying; a partial change in the form, position, state or quality of a thing”. Oxford dictionary defines **variation** as “a change or slight difference in condition, amount, or level, typically within certain limits”.

Oxford dictionary defines **gender** as the state of being male or female (typically used with reference to social and cultural differences rather than biological ones)’. Wikipedia.org defines **gender** as “the range of characteristics pertaining to, and differentiating between, masculinity and femininity”. **Gender** according to the productionary.com is “a grammatical category, often designed as male, female or neuter.’”

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.0 INTRODUCTION

There has been considerable interest on the study of sociolinguistic variation associated with speaker's gender. Over the years, there has been lots of research in this field. Many articles have been published both in learned journals and edited collections. Sociolinguistics, among other fields of study within the scope of linguistics has several evidences on gender related issues.

Sociolinguistics can be best defined as the study of language and its society. The study of language in its social context then has to do with the study of linguistic variation.

Moreover, speakers who differ from each other in terms of age, gender, social class, ethnic group, for example, will also differ from each other in their speech, even in the same context.

Sociolinguists are interested in both stylistic and social variation. According to Gumperz (1971), sociolinguistics is ‘an attempt to find correlations between social structure and linguistic structure and to observe any change that occurs’. Hudson (1996) sees sociolinguistics as “the relationship between language and society”, while Holmes (1994) conceives sociolinguistics as “aimed towards theory which provides a motivated account of the way language is used in a community and of people when they use language”. Coulmas (1997) perceives sociolinguistics as “an investigation of how social structure influences the way people talk and how language varieties and patterns of use correlates with social attributes such as class, sex and age”.

This chapter thus, reviews some related literature on language and gender, and how gender as a sociolinguistic variable affects interaction among males and females.

2.1 LANGUAGE AND GENDER

Language can be described as a system of communication that enables humans to cooperate. This stresses the social functions of language and the fact that humans use it to express themselves and to manipulate objects in their environment. According to Bloomfield (1914) “language refers to the specifically human capacity for acquiring and using complex systems of communication, or to a specific instance of such a system of complex communication”.

According to Thorne et al (1983) the term gender “does not refer to grammatical gender (the system to be found in some language of organizing certain word class into contrasting categories of masculine, feminine, neuter) but referred to social categories based on sex but encompasses behaviour, roles and images that, although not biologically determined are regarded by society as appropriate to its male and female members”.

Gender is therefore distinguished from sex in that sex is referred to as a biological component of male and female, whereas, gender component is

socially learned and acquired. More so, sociolinguistic study of gender shows that variation in the use of language according to gender is intimately connected to socio-cultural patterns which reflect socio-economic and political inequality and male dominance in many societies.

Reflecting social status or power difference, Lakoff (1975) in her research claims that women's language as a whole reveals women's social powerlessness and is thus dominated by stylistic features, significant insecurity and lack of assertiveness. She further argues that female language is consequently heavily influenced by the pragmatic principle of politeness which basically rules adaptive social behaviour. The different views of language and gender as elicited above have come to a common ground that language and gender are inseparable and if any major difference exists, it becomes obvious in the intention of the user were believed to use strong asserted sentences. This study confirms Lakoff's assumption about the usage of tag questions even though Lakoff never provided any empirical evidence about the usage of tag questions (Coates, 1993:118-119).

2.2 THEORIES ON GENDER IN LANGUAGE USE

When it comes to men's and women's way of using slang it is confirmed by many researchers, for example by Flexner (1960) that it is an exclusive property of males. In 1975, Robin Lakoff claimed that everybody, without exception, knew that the word 'shit' is part of male vocabulary, while the expression 'oh dear!' is part of female vocabulary (Spender, 1980:34). Since languages change it is now, one has to think about these statements. The word 'shit' and the expression 'oh dear!' may have another meaning today compared with their meaning when Lakoff made the statement in 1975. Moreover, languages reflect our society and at that time, in 1975, there were not so many women using taboo words.

Jespersen (1922), who had many things to say about women's speech, made it clear that women lack precision in their speech. He did not only have an opinion about that, he also explained that it was because women frequently used something called intensifiers in their speech. Others agreed with Jespersen, such as for instance Lakoff (1975). According to Lakoff women used 'so' more often than men while Key said that women used 'such' more often than men. Spender

argues about the classification of intensifiers and hyperboles. She also criticizes the non-objective linguistic research where the result is indeed dependent whether it is an utterance made by a woman or a man. If the utterance is made by a woman one finds the word to be an intensifier and if made by a man the word will be categorized as a hyperbole (Spender, 1980:32-38).

Women's way of speech is often connected with tentativeness and the reason for this might be their way of using hedges. These hedges are linguistic forms such as I think, you know, I'm sure, sort of, perhaps, e.t.c. Lakoff appears to be rather convinced that women's speech contains more hedges than men's speech. She explains that it is because 'women are socialised to believe that asserting themselves strongly is not nice or ladylike, or even feminine' (Lakoff, 1975:54). Another researcher named Bent Preisler (1986) also claims that women use more hedges in their language. Preisler's conclusion is based on his survey, where he recorded groups consisting of four people of both single-sex and mixed sexes. The participants discussed controversial subjects such as violence on television or corporal punishment for children. Coates gives a possible reason for men's lower

usage of hedges and their choice of topics. She explains that men prefer to talk about impersonal subjects (Coates, 1993:116-118). Yet, another researcher named Janet Holmes (2006) has made a study concerning hedges. Her analysis proves that hedges are multi-functional. Hedges reflect the speaker's certainty as well as uncertainty in a conversation.

Tag questions, such as I did- didn't I?, He was- wasn't he? etc. are also one of the linguistic forms that are connected with tentativeness according to Lakoff who claims that females use more tag questions than males. Coates mentions a survey made by Robert Siegler (1976), the participants in the survey were given sentences and they were told that the sentences came from conversations between college students. The sentences involved tag questions or strong assertions. Some of the sentences had tag questions and some had strong assertions. The participants' task was to establish whether the sentence was originally produced by a female or a male. The participants in the survey answered that females were most likely to use tag questions while males were believed to use strong asserted sentences (Coates, 1993:118-119).

2.3 SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF MALE AND FEMALE SPEECH

In *Living Language* (2000:222), George Keith and John Shuttleworth record suggestions that:

- women - talk more than men, talk too much, are more polite, are indecisive/hesitant, complain and nag, ask more questions, support each other, are more co-operative, whereas
- men - swear more, don't talk about emotions, talk about sport more, talk about women and machines in the same way, insult each other frequently, are competitive in conversation, dominate conversation, speak with more authority, give more commands, interrupt more.

Note that some of these are objective descriptions, which can be verified (ask questions, give commands) while others express unscientific popular ideas about language and introduce non-linguistic value judgments (nag, speak with more authority).

Robin Lakoff, in 1975, published an influential account of women's language in the book *Language and Woman's Place*, she presents a set of basic assumptions about what marks out the language of women. Among these are claims that women makes use of:

- **Hedge:** using phrases like “sort of”, “kind of”, “it seems like”, and so on.
- **polite forms:** “Would you mind...”, “I'd appreciate it if...”, “...if you don't mind”.
- **Tag questions:** “*you're going to dinner, aren't you?*”
- **Speak in italics:** intonational emphasis equal to underlining words - so, very, quite.
- **empty adjectives:** divine, lovely, adorable, and so on
- **Hypercorrect grammar and pronunciation:** English prestige grammar and clear enunciation.

- **Direct quotation:** men paraphrase more often than women for example: *Then she said that he said, "I won't do it." So I said, "why not?"*
- **Have a special lexicon:** women use more words for things like colors, men for sports.
- **Use question intonation in declarative statements:** women make declarative statements into questions by raising the pitch of their voice at the end of a statement, expressing uncertainty. For example, *"What school do you attend? Eton College?"*
- **Use "wh-" imperatives:** (such as, *"Why don't you open the door?"*)
- **Speak less frequently**
- **Overuse qualifiers:** (for example, *"I Think that..."*)
- **Apologize more:** (for instance, *"I'm sorry, but I think that..."*)
- **Use modal constructions:** (such as can, would, should, ought - *"Should we turn up the heat?"*)
- **Avoid coarse language or expletives**

- **Use indirect commands and requests:** (for example, “*My, isn't it cold in here?*” - really a request to turn the heat on or close a window)
- **Use more intensifiers:** especially ‘so’ and ‘very’ (for instance, “*I am so glad you came!*”)

Lack a sense of humour: women do not tell jokes well and often don't understand the punch line of jokes.

2.4 DIFFERENCES IN MALE AND FEMALE SPEECH

A variety of explanations has been proposed for gender difference in language use (for example, Henley and Krammer (1991), Uchida (1992)). Some argue that innate biological differences account for sex differentiated rates of language acquisition as well as for psychological orientation or temperament (Buffery and Gray 1992; Mc-Glone 1980; Gottman and Levenson 1988). other researchers put a great deal of stress on socialization as an explanatory factor (Maltz and Broker 1982; Tannen 1987). In many societies, girls and boys experience different patterns of socialization and

this, it is suggested leads to different ways of using and interpreting language (Holmes 1995:7).Lakoff (1975) claims that there are a number of lexical, grammatical and phonological features that characterize women's language" lexical differences were said to relate to the use of certain colour contour (e.g. Beige, ecru) and certain adjectives of approval (e.g. adorable, charming). A postulated grammatical difference concerns the use of tags (i.e. form such as "isn't it", won't you?" phonological differentiation was illustrated in terms of rising intonation contours. Kramer (1977) reports that men's speech (particularly English speakers) is forceful, efficient, blunt, authoritative, serious, effective, sparing, and masterful", on the other hand, it is believed that women's speech is "weak, trivial, ineffectual, hesitant, hyper-polite, euphemistic, and often characterized by gossip and gibberish". Hartmann (1976) studied the language of women and claimed to have located some of its euphemistic qualities. She describes their language as 'flowery', 'tentative', and 'qualified' and therefore a lesser or deficient form. She went further to state that female used more qualifiers than men, and that

men used more absolutes. Women were also claimed to use intensifier and this is responsible for the lack of precision in women's speech (Jespersen, 1922).

On prestige, Thorne and Henley (1975) claimed 'that women use status linguistic forms more than men. They said that women compared with men of the same social class, age and level of education, more often choose the form close to the 'prestigious' or 'correct' way of talking. Similarly, Trudgill (1975) claims that women constantly produce linguistic forms which are closely approached to those of standard language or have higher prestige than those produced by men.

Traditionally, it is observed that women are talkative. However, research findings contradict this position. It has been established that men talk more. For instance, Swacker (1975) had her thirty-four informants (17 of each sex) talk into a tape recorder. She found out that men talked much longer than women usually until the tape was finished.

Studies on interruption phenomena in conversation also shed more light on sex differences in language. According to the stereotype of women's language, women are supposed to nag, chatter, and talk too much and little too little, and are therefore prime suspect on any measure of interruption (Spender 1980:43) but research findings reveal the opposite; for instance, Zimmerman and West (1975) found that 98% of interruption in mixed sex conversation was made by male.

Interruption is a mechanism by which males can prevent females from talking and they can gain the floor for themselves. This contributes to the contraction and maintenance of male to supremacy. Romaine (1999) has put forward a hypothesis that women's language beyond being polite, tends to show solidarity as opposed to men's, which shows power.

Furthermore, on the single-sex conversations that has been analysed, women tend to see conversation as an opportunity to discuss problems, share experiences and offer support as against the men who see the discussion of personal problem as an abnormal component of conversation.

CHAPTER THREE

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

3.0 INTRODUCTION

Having explored the concept of variation in the previous chapters, it is obvious that variation is not restricted to language or does not refer only to differences between two languages, say English and Yoruba. Therefore in this chapter we are going to make vivid presentation of variation according to gender from different languages.

3.1 METHODOLOGY

The method of this study was gotten from internet works, personal observation, conference papers and interaction with some of the native speakers, like in the case of Igbo language, where I made contacts with some native speakers of the language.

3.2 DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

I will begin by examining some phonologically related gender variation, in Zulu language spoken in South Africa.

Men	Women	Gloss
Amanzi	amandabu	'water'

Wardhaugh (1986)

In Zulu language, women are prohibited from pronouncing words such as 'amanzi' because it contains [z] sound, but use 'amandabu' which does not contain [z] sound while the men are allowed to use it. Generally speaking women in Zulu are prohibited from making use of any word that has the [z] sound.

Ubang language spoken in Cross River State in Nigeria:

Men	Women	Gloss
Kitong	irue	'yam'
Okpo	oba	'human leg'
Nko	ogbala	'cup'
Ibue	obe	'goat'
Rissi	rishi	'head'
Kabu	okwakwe	'dog'
Iruwe	weruweme	'I am hungry'

In Ubang language, the variation is natural as women are prohibited to use the same speech form with the men. However, there is a common means of communication devised between the men and women.

In addition, Aweti language spoken in parts of Brazil and Portugal:

Men	Women	Gloss
Nympek	ypek	‘duck’
Napuryt	apuryt	‘parrot’
Nyzapat	yzapat	‘bow’
Atit	ito	‘I’

Drude (2002:189)

The gender variation in Aweti language suggests that the vowel initial forms are ancestral, and that the [n] initial forms are innovations in the language which is considered the men form of speech.

The Karaja language spoken in central Brazil:

Men	Women	Gloss
Aobo	aaobo	‘fish’

Bu	hi	‘cry’
Sira	bu	‘to be angry’
Bebe	mi	‘surprise’
Wu	ku	‘calling’

Fortune and fortune (1975:23)

Karaja language has a standard form of variation in which men and women have different forms of communication.

Beyond phonological variation, we also have morphological variation. In other words, there is evidence of variation in the use of lexical items between genders in some languages.

Koasati language spoken in south western Louisiana:

Men	Women	Gloss
Lakawtakkos	lakawwa	‘I am not lifting it’

Also in Japanese, the use of first person pronoun by the men differs from the women:

Men	Women	Gloss
Boku	watashi	'I'
Ore	atashi	'you'

Other variations include:

Ketsu	oshiri	'hips'
He:	onara	'fart'
Kuu:	taberu	'to eat'

Wardhaugh (1986:311)

The variation in Japanese between men and women depends more on politeness, in that the women's speech tend to be more polite than that of the men.

Furthermore, there is also a sociological gender variation in Igbo language spoken in the south eastern part of Nigeria this form of variation is found in

Taboo expressions like:

Men	Women	Gloss
Akwuna	igba ama	‘flirt’
Inwu	ihafu	‘to die’
Igbu	iwe hundu	‘to kill’
Inunso	inwe obia	‘to menstruate’
Ime	iruju afo	‘pregnancy’
Ikwa iko	imehe apari	‘illicit love act’
Ira otu	ira hu	‘to make love’
Mmaonwu	onye we ani	‘masquerade’

Although this variation is shared adequately by men and women in Igbo language, the Igbo culture tends to pose restrictions on the use of taboo expressions by women. This goes on to say that women are more linguistically polite and reserved in their speech than the men.

Gender variation in congregational greeting in Igbo language:

Men:

Greeting: cha cha cha cha Igbo kwenu!

Response: yaa!

Greeting: rie nu!

Response: yaa!

Greeting: nuo nu!

Congregational greeting from men to women

Gloss

Greeting: ndi banyi ndewoo!

my people I well done

Response: ndewoo!

Well done

Congregational greeting for women:

Greeting: nde nga anyi nnu anuola oooo!

Gloss: our people, I greet you all oo!

Reponse: anyi ekele oooo!

Gloss: we greet you ooo!

In greetings in Igbo language, gender is a major factor that affects the patterns of address. This implies that in most cases, men are addressed differently from the women. On the other hand, women do not use forceful words in greeting, they rather say the greetings softly and sometimes lengthen the greeting to show politeness. While the men use force in their greeting to show supremacy.

CHAPTER FOUR

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

4.0 INTRODUCTION

This study set out to demonstrate the inherent differences in male and female use of language, that is, the sex exclusive and sex preferential markers that exist in a language. This study has examined the language use among male and female speakers of various languages.

4.1 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This chapter gives a summary of the whole concept this research work, the project consist of four chapters. From the study carried out, it can be said that in so many languages, males and females use different speech patterns. Cultural and environmental factors are argued to be the underlying factors responsible for these differences. It is pertinent to also note that these

variations could either be phonological, morphological or sociological gender variation.

These differences in the speech pattern of males and females could result in miscommunication and misinterpretation in the process of interaction especially among second language learners.

4.2 CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that in many societies, there exist male and female differences in the use of language. In a society where gender plays a major role language also has a key role to perform in the contribution of that role. Differences in the gender roles, identities of men and women, hierarchical nature of gender relations and the dominance of men constitute the factors that contribute to the differences in language use. Gender differentiation does not exist in vacuum: it interacts in a complex way with other kinds of social differentiation. But language and gender are developed

through participation in everyday social practice. In other words, language and gender are inextricably linked.

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