

## **LANGUAGE, GENDER AND CULTURE**

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### **Abstract**

The issues of language, gender as well as culture have always been a sensitive and volatile one in the present dispensation. Since language and culture have been intricately woven together, the concept of gender which has become a contentious one in recent times had been linked, thus resulting in a wider line of argument. In African context, culture plays a very prominent role and its effects are profoundly felt. This has thus led to different connotations attached to both male and female genders. It is the contention of this paper to look into the concepts of language, gender and culture vis-a-vis the meanings already attached to them as a result of beliefs and the meanings which are now being argued for them in the present society. The paper observes that our society is dynamic and quite a lot of changes are now taking place and as a result of this, there is the need to ensure that no gender is dehumanized even though at present, the road for the female gender to be at par with the other gender may be a rough one. Efforts should be made to ensure that the best is achieved in ensuring that both genders are treated with a high degree of understanding, respect and equity.

## **Introduction**

There have been very many definitions of culture just like many other social concepts that cut across nearly all disciplines.. There is also a tendency for interested scholars to define culture and illustrate it with particular reference to their own disciplines. In this paper however, we shall define and explicate the concept of culture within the ambit of social phenomena. The term social phenomena refers to all the elements in a given societal identities such as religions, norms and cultures. Thus, culture is subsumed under social phenomena and it refers to the complex collection of beliefs, customs, language habits that give a common identity to a particular group of people at a specific point in time.

Culture refers to man's way of life which he acquires as a member of a group or society. This include knowledge, laws, mores, values, customs, religion and rules which allow him to fit properly and relate well with other members in the society. It is the attitudes beliefs, mores, customs, language traditions, habits, achievement, spiritually, thoughts traits of society that are passed on from one generation to another. The centre for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) defines culture as the shared patterns of behaviours and interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding that are learned through a process of socialization. These shared patterns identify the members of a culture group while also distinguishing those of another group. It is an aspect of social phenomena which refers to the complex collection of beliefs, customs, language, habits that give a common identity to a particular group of people at a specific point in time. Dasyuva (2007:3) puts it more succinctly this way: "culture defines a people's civilization and determines its identity". From the foregoing, we can see that culture is a nucleus of social identity which has to do with the way of life of a people; which include rules, customs language and language-usage patterns. Mkpka (1987:572) defines culture as a "gamut of the knowledge, beliefs, customs, tradition and skills that are available to the member of society". Also the United Nations Educational Scientific (2002:19) portrays culture as a set of distinctive, spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a special groups, and it encompasses, in addition to art and Literature, life styles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and belief.

We can infer from these definitions and submissions above that culture is not only a basis of group or social identity but a product of interaction among people living together as a group. The interaction among the people is possible through the use of language. In other words, culture itself is created through language because man employs language in creating and sharing many of the characteristics of culture such as laws. Rules, songs and customs. Hymes (1964) corroborates this assertion by declaring that culture is a community's international and interpretational norms.

Thus, one can hardly separate culture from language. Without language, preservation of cultural characteristics would have been unthinkable and impossible since culture is a product of social interaction. Language therefore is the vehicle of culture and and all forms of language (verbal and non-verbal) are involved in the creation of cultural characteristics. The importance of language to culture is captured in the submission of Osunketan (2009:231) where she declares language as the most useful and most enduring of a people's cultural heritage. She stresses that the knowledge of a people's language is the knowledge of their culture. Thus, we have seen that both culture and language are intertwined. In short, there is a dynamic relationship that exists between culture and language.

## **Language and gender**

Studies of the link between language and gender blossomed in the past three decades. Many scholars have attempted to portray women's and men's speech style across a wide variety of contexts'. Much of these have demonstrate concern with the issue of power asymmetries in interaction involving men and women and men's speech have been labelled as powerful speech while women's speech are

powerless speech. For instance, the issue of male dominance over women in speech has been documented in (Fishman 1983, West, 1995).

Many studies have also concentrated on women's inferior speech style (Lakoff 1975). Others have also argued that although there is a difference between women's speech and men's speech; yet women's speech are equal to men's speech and should be valued in its own right. Women talk is viewed as being cooperative, while on the contrary, men's speech is considered as being very competitive. These views permeate many works on gender (Coates, 1996, Tannen, 1990).

In support of the above views, Kendall and Tannen (2001) observe that early language and gender research tended to focus on (i) documenting empirical difference between women's and men's speech, especially in cross-sex interaction, (ii) describing women's speech in particular, and (iii) identifying the role of language in creating and maintaining social inequality between women and men. Adegbite (2009) in his work on gender and gendered discourse also submits that later studies on the cultural influence on gender, language and society investigated gender differences as communication, gender as related patterns of talk, the 'difference' and 'dominance' debates, interaction between gender and other social identities and categories such as ethnicity, social class and sexuality.

Also in Adegbite (2009), Kendall and Tannen (2001:566-560) posit that despite all these varieties of views among these debaters, there is point of agreement between them, they indicate points of agreement as well as the most widely debated issues in gender discourse. Points of agreement listed include: (i) The social construction of gender, which implies that the measuring of gender is culturally mediated and gendered identities internationally achieved (Goffman 1976, Butler, 1990); (ii) the indirect relationship between gender and discourse, which implies the ways of speaking are not sex-linked (identified with every individual women and men) but sex-class linked (associated with class of women or class of men), (Tannen, 1994); (iii) gendered discourse as a resource, which explains that cultural influences do not determine the form that a speaker's discourse will take but rather provide a range from which individual styles are chosen: and (iv) gendered discourse as a constraint, which underlies, for example, Eckert and McConnell Ginet (1992: 473) exhortation that language and gender researchers examine women's and men's language use in communities of practice. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet explain that 'speakers develop linguistic pattern as they act in their various communities in which they participate'. Their sitters of engagement are relevant to the relation between micro-actions and macro-social structures, because the relation between gender and language resides in the mode of participant available to various individuals within various communities of practices as a direct or indirect function of gender (Adegbite 2009:13). To buttress all the assertions above, some of the researchers on family relationship focus on language and gender issue. It is widely acknowledged that some of the research findings on family interaction support the image of male dominance and power imbalances between the father and other members of the family. For example, Macdonald (1980) studies husband-wife power relationships and finds out the decision making indicators such as turn-taking (that is, who makes most decisions) interruptions (who interrupts most) as the primary indicator of power lies with the husband. Many researchers have also relied on decision-making outcomes as an indicator of power to study husband and wife power relationships and come out with the fact that power lies with the husband (Cromwell and Olsen 1975, McDonald 1980, Scanzoni, 1979). It has also been argued that male representation symbolizes all that is positive and powerful while female representation symbolizes all that is negative and weak. For example, in Farinde (2009), Luchjenbroers (1998) study reveals that men are depicted as active (always doing, developing, midwifering) born to succeed (always chairman, director, succeeds as , appointed, took a degree etc). Women on the other hand are represented as passive, even in success (e.g she was named executive director) as animals (e.g she is a rare breed), embryos children (e.g. childlike and silly) and their positive qualities are always juxtaposed with negative qualities (e.g. she toyed with the idea of setting up her business, Luchjenbroers (1998)

However, some studies on language and gender also view power as being contested between husband and wife and even children in the family. Huls (2002) working in the realm of power processes studies the concept of power in the Turkish immigrant families. Borrowing insight from conversational analysis approach, he analyses power and topic control by the use of turn taking system on two Turkish immigrant families, Hull's finding suggests that mothers in the two families dominate the conversation followed by their children. Contrary to the wide speculations of male dominance, she asserts that fathers are very passive in the conversations of the two families.

Hul's (1989) study also dwells on decision-making indicators in the family of both high status (factory director) and low status (janitor). Central to the study are turn-taking, directives, interruption with which the data are analysed. In the study of the two families, the mothers have a winning chance of 70% while the fathers have 50%. The eight-year olds have a winning chance of 40% while the pre-school children chance hovers around 25% Huls (1989:129). This means that mothers in these families have more conversational power than husbands. From the above, it is obvious that power is negotiable. Power is seen as being contestable between the husband and wife. Men can be powerful at the workplace and wouldn't concern themselves with the daily decisions at home while women reign and decide on the daily affairs at home (Farinde 2006)

## **Gender and culture**

The issue of gender and culture are very germane and of importance in the current study on gender. In a broad term, 'gender' can be seen as a term that makes reference to the sex-role identity. According to Adegbite (2009), the term is used by humans to emphasize the distinction between males and females. According to Encarta Encyclopedia (2005). 'gender' and 'sex' are often used interchangeably, the term 'sex' specifically relates to the biological and physical characteristics which make a person to be male or female at birth. 'Gender' on its own refers to the behaviours that are associated with the member of that sex.

Culture is another very inciting concept and it is intricately related to the society. Society and culture cannot be separated and as such, it becomes impossible to set the issue of culture aside when anything society-related is being discussed. Culture could be taken as the artistic and other activity of the mind and the works produced by this; it is a state of high development in arts and thought existing in a society and represented at various levels in its members. One of the cogent issues of thought in the society today is that of gender and it is receiving much attention at various levels today.

It has been observed in recent years that the term 'gender' has been in popular use so as to recognize the social and cultural differences that are usually associated with men and women in society. The term was created to sharpen our perception of discrimination and that is why the term 'cultural diversity' stands out to recognize the creativity of human beings. Gender and culture have many elements in common. In many societies women have to be better than men in order to get the same opportunities. The same is true of the different races and colours and that is why there is the need for a more balanced understanding as far as culture is concerned.

In a broad sense, culture could be said to result from human interaction with nature and generalized ways of social interaction with knowledge, language and belief system. The dominant perception of culture is heritage (whether tangible or intangible) that is often used to form a cultural environment that shapes attitudes and behaviour which eventually gives identity to the society. Understanding is the process of cultural creation and as knowledge is evolving, so are languages and belief systems of the society. Every human being contributes as much to cultural changes as he or she is shaped by cultural heritage (Mulak et al (2001)

Gender and culture also have in common a number of options for change. Transfer of good practice in intellectual dialogue to gender relation is possible and vice versa. Key qualification for intercultural dialogue such as empathy, the ability to look at things from different perspectives and

appreciation of pluralism and diversity can be learnt, developed through cultural creation and quality media.

In recent years, there had been the development of non-sexist language. This has been promoted and undertaken by public institutions, the media professional organization. For women organization, this development has been a success story and more of such is usually canvassed for especially by the women-folk. The development has given women the impetus to feel truly human. This is as a result of what culture, especially the African culture, has done to the women race. To a reasonable extent, the concept of womanhood had been subjugated, downgraded and handled as sub-human.

According to Akorede and Olaleye (2008), women have always been looking outside their group to justify their predicament. They have always accused men of perpetuating women's oppression and relegation; the marginalization of women in politics and other realms. As a result of the negative aspects of parts of our culture, women are prohibited from doing or saying certain things which can be done or said by the opposite sex. In some areas, women are not allowed to play a leading role or direct some affairs no matter their age or experience. Rather, a young male will be preferred if an older male is not around. Again, in some circles, women are not allowed to sit in front position; they are usually given some places at the back. This implies that they had been relegated.

From the cultural point of view, there are some beliefs among Africans that women are prohibited from touching a particular object at home; they are prohibited from entering a room which has been made to be a power house as far as 'black power' is concerned. The belief is that if the female gender could touch or enter into such a prohibited room, the power of the black magic and medicine would have been destroyed and rendered useless again. In addition to this, there are some lexical items which women should not say at a particular time. However, there are some objects, ideas or cultural matters which are generally referred to through the use of alternative lexis at a particular time or place. This is as a result of the belief system.

From our observations, there is no single stereotypical way of how men and women talk in the society but there are a number of stereotypical portraits on the basis of which a few generalizations have been made. It is the common belief that women speak 'better' in a more correct and refined way than men. Also, it is assumed that men swear and use slangs more than women. Some of these characteristics are stereotypes (Poynton, 1989; Hall, 2001). It can be deduced that such recent works on women's and men's language has been carried out by people whose interests are basically political rather than being linguistic and some of these analysts have little sophistication in linguistic analysis and interpretation. That is why language experts have to be more careful in this type of studies. This is not to say that their observations are not valid but the fact is that there is the need to properly scrutinize such findings.

Now, turning to linguistic differences between men and women, some features have been identified and they had been supported by Poynton (1989). In the level of discourse, it had been observed that men interrupt women and not the other way round in a conversation that includes two or more people. In terms of switching pause, studies have shown that white males have a longer pause after their turn than do white females. Among the black race, the opposite is the case. In term of topic choice, it has been discovered that men, and do reject women's topic choices in mixed sex conversation while women will talk on topics raised by men. In another dimension, men use more commands than women and men always want to assert their authority. When women do use commands they tend to be more polite by choosing interrogative, especially modalized or a declarative clause like *would you mind opening the window? Or I wonder if you will be so kind to open the window*. All these and many other of such differences have been identified in the use of language by the two sexes.

No doubt, both men and women make use of same language but in different ways and that is why it might be different to talk to parity and equality in language use. These observations have revealed that much still needs to be done in the issue of parity between the two genders especially when the idea of custom is added. No doubt, much has been done and still being done so as to ensure that the female gender is seen as fellow human being of equal opportunity and role in the society. Much of the African belief systems preventing a gender group from doing something, saying something or taking an action do not have any basis; rather they are just as a result of the belief system which if violated, will not cause any havoc or danger.

## **Conclusion**

The popular cries of the female gender are equality. The principle of equality of men and women is not difficult to understand, if objectives are clarified. Problems would, however, rather be obscured by using the term 'gender parity' to reflect the principle of equality at all levels now. As long as gender relations are mostly left to women's organization, and debated at meetings with a majority of female participants, the deep structures of that mentality will remain unchanged. There is the need to thread softly as far as equality is concerned. Those things that should be taken into consideration are the need for respect, understanding and positive thinking between the two genders. The basic fact is that all human beings are equally created and no one is an island. Both men and women should be treated equally but in terms of the choice of roles, we need to be more conscious as far as parity or equality is concerned.

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