Sexism in English language usage in select Nigerian Christian tracts

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Abstract

Through a dominance approach, the paper seeks to examine sexism in the English language that is used within select Nigerian Christian Tracts (NCT). Forty purposively sampled English medium tracts from four Nigerian Pentecostal churches were examined to assess if sexist language were present in this genre of religious text. Stratified random sampling technique was employed in selecting fifteen sampled sentences for the analysis. A simple statistical approach was used to analyse the categories of sexism within the data. The findings revealed the use of ‘man’ as sexist language to represent ‘humans’ and the masculine gender pronoun ‘he’ was used to represent both sexes. In some instances, the use of gender neutral ‘he or she’ and gender neutral singular pronoun ‘they’ was used within the language of NCTs. This shows that women are trivialised as appendages to men as reflected in the language of NCTs. The paper concludes that since women make more than half of the total population of readers of NCTs, cases of linguistic dominance and discrimination against women through NCTs must be censored to ensure Nigerian women of different faiths enjoy mutual acceptability and equality within religious texts.

Keywords: Nigerian Christian tracts, sexism, English usage.

Introduction

The words ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ have been employed interchangeably, whereas they have different locations. Sex refers to physiological or and biological differences between men and women, while gender refers to traits each culture or speech community ascribes to a sex as a result of the social norms and beliefs in that milieu (Litosseliti, 2006). According to Udofot (2009), sexism presupposes all forms of derogatory references, prejudice or discrimination against females. Feminism has become a popular movement, in recent time, since people from different human societies have started utilising this socio-economic and political ideology to challenge women enslavement through language. This concept arose as a linguistic or literary ideology to fight against patriarchy in our society (Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 1993). Gender language started in the mid-1970s when the gender linguists such as Lakoff (1975) and Tannen (1993) started writing about gender language and condemning the linguistic slavery of women.

Most languages have different linguistic prejudices and violence against women. For example, among the Yorubas in Nigerian South West, derogatory remarks are used against women. Linguistic discrimination against women is shown mostly in Yoruba metalanguage such as proverbs, idioms etc. For instance, a cowardly person in Yoruba language is described as ‘obinrin lasan lasan’ which means ‘weak person’ (Yusuf, 2002). In this context, Yoruba people often address a man as ‘obinrin lasan’ ‘mere woman’ or ‘a weakling’, if the person is often afraid of facing challenges, difficulties or often fearful of taking risks. Also, the Igbo in Eastern Nigeria always address a cowardly man as ‘a weakling’. This is shown by Achebe (1958), in Things Fall Apart when Okokwo killed Ikemefuna who calls him ‘father’ to avoid being called ‘a weakling’.

Nilsen (1977), Udofot (2001; 2009) and Yusuf (2002), suggest that linguistic sexism is reflected through the employment of language to ignore, derogate and trivialise women. Nilsen (1977) and Udofot (2009), further add that English, as a language, is the most sexist language in the world. This is in consonance with the use of some Nigerian mother-tongues like Igbo and Yoruba. For example, in the use of Yoruba and Igbo languages in spousal or couple discourse, men always use dominant language to address their wives, while women always unconsciously accept their subjugation by addressing their husbands as ‘my lord’ or ‘my master’ (Aremu, 2013, p. 9). Masculine gender is utilized in the English language to refer to both male and female. For example, in the statement ‘Everybody knows...”
where his shoe pinches,' the pronoun 'his' has been used to refer to both male and female. In the same vein, the word 'man' is often employed in English language to refer to both male and female. This is shown in the expression:

1. 'Man proposes, God disposes'
2. 'Every man knows where his shoe pinches.'

In the two examples above, the word 'man' refers to 'human.' In another perception, the word 'man' is used in the expressions 'common man', 'white man', and 'Man is a political animal' to mean 'human' (Udofot, 2009). Ogbugolo (2010), in his keynote address at the Nigeria English Studies Association (NESA) conference, uttered that 'Reading makes a man, but conferences a better man,' the word 'man' implies 'human'. All these are examples of linguistic violence against women.

English as a sexist language

Many languages, including English, employ derogatory connotations and epithets in referring to women. For instance, in Yoruba proverbs, different damming epithets are employed to ridicule and trivialize women. Examples include:

1. 'O o 'lobinrin, o l'oo f'aje' (You have no wife and you hate marrying a witch);
2. 'Alawoku l'obinrin' (Women are semi-insane); and
3. 'Obinrin bi'mo fun ni kop e ko mo pa ni' (If a woman has children for you, she can still kill you).

In each of these examples, women are described as 'wicked', 'terrible' and 'senseless' (Yusuf, 1996; 2002).

Also in the English Language, women are described as second class citizen and less important. Women are classified as appendages to their male counterparts in English language (Nilsen, 1977). For instance, Nilsen (1977) stated that most English nouns and suffixes like '-ress', '-ness' and '-ess' are used as 'feminine' suffixes used in language such are 'priores', 'princess' 'majorrette', hostess. Other examples of feminine nouns in English are 'Woman-doctor', 'Woman-lawyer' 'women-journalist', women-engineer etc. According to Udofot (2009), women are described as appendages to men and there is constant male bias in word combinations in separate words refer to female and male. For instance, in 'he or she', 'Adam and eve' 'brothers and sisters', 'Daddy and Mummy', the male come first (Udofot, 2009; Yusuf, 2002). Udofot (2009), indicates the male is often described as the stronger, dominating and worthier sex in the English language.

Hence, sexism is reflected in naming process in the English language. For instance, the concept of marital-renaming is a borrowed culture of the English speaking people to Africa. In the view of Udofot (2009) and Yusuf (2002), marital-renaming is a form of linguistic domination in which a lady become 'a property' transferred from parents to a husband who may prove to be either unfaithful or irresponsible to the marital contracts. Thorne and Henley (1975, p.29) state that to call people 'Mrs.' or 'miss' is to help relegate, and trivialise women. The history of each society is the story-line of males and not female. Also, the language used when talking about the history of a society is 'His story' and not 'Her story'. In their bid to find solution to the problems of sexist meaning, feminists, who are female, may have retained their maiden names if they marry, while some have adopted the title 'Ms' to de-emphasize the undue dominance of males they have also adopted the notion of combining their maiden names with those of their husbands.

In addition, there is also the semantic derogation of woman in the English language. This semantic derogation, in the view of Udofot (2009, p.13), "helps to construct females' inferiority and equally helps to confirm it." Series of derogatory vocabularies on women exist in the English language. Example are 'hags', 'witches'. However, different methods have been employed by gender-linguists in avoiding sexism in the English language usage. It has been suggested that generic masculine should be replaced with 'he or she' him or her' in order to indicate that women are included in the antecedent of the pronouns (Yusuf, 2002; Udofot, 2009). Examples of such statements include:

1. Everybody should bring his or her money.
2. Every good citizen should think on how he or she will uplift his or her country.

Also, Nilsen (1979), Chesire (1985) and Yusuf (2004), have proposed that gender neutral third person pronoun they and its forms should be used to give a singular meaning. Examples from Yusuf (2004), include the following:

1. Everybody should love their parents more than themselves;
2. A pastor is a role model: so, they should always be honest; and
3. If anyone visits, ask for their cell-phone number so I can call them back.

In examples above, the singular use ‘they’ has been used to refer to a person of unspecified sex as well as an alternative to he, his or him. In addition, Cameron (1985) and Yusuf (2004) suggested generic feminine pronoun she and its variants in replacement of the generic masculine pronoun he and its equivalents. The following examples include:

4. ‘Every Nigerian should love her country more than herself; she should be ready to die for it.

5. ‘Everybody should bring her money by herself; she should also be ready to follow us.

In recent times, new gender-neutral pronouns have been created to replace generic masculine pronouns. Among these new hybrids of generic neutral pronouns, ‘e’ is used to mean ‘he or she’ and ‘ir’ stands for ‘him or her’, and ‘his or her’ (Ker 1996, p.11). This has made the following sentence as described by Udofot (2009, p.14) acceptable:

6. ‘Every good citizen should love it country more than itself; e should be ready to die for it.

Also, when reference is made to either of both sexes, but not specifically to the male sex, the words ‘man’ and ‘men’ must be avoided. It is equally unacceptable to use ‘man’ to mean ‘humans’ since women constitute half of the world population (Udofot, 2009). It is noteworthy to state here that generic feminist linguists have been vehemently criticized to be ‘hypersensitive’ while their language has been termed ‘ungrammatical’ (Goddard & Patterson 2000; Heintz 2000; Yusuf 2002). For instance, Heintz (2000:28) has described the view of feminist linguist as ‘the tarnishing of English.’ Conversely, some linguists like Thorne and Henley (1975) and Meyers (1989) have convincingly defended non-sexist language against the criticisms of the sexist linguists.

Language of Religious Discourse

Scholars have examined the features of the religious language. Examples of such include: Crystal (1965), Crystal and Davy (1969), Donovan (1976), Samarin (1976), Oha (1977), Odebunmi (2007), Babatunde (2007). According to Samarin (1976, p.29) in his sociolinguistic study of religious text, “a religious language is a distinctly characterized language.” It is a language which is characterized by much employment of symbols and indices that is employed tactfully (Crystal & Davy, 1969). Oha (1997), studied the rhetoric of Nigerian Christian videos by examining the war paradigms of ‘The Great Mistake’, where Christian home videos are often employed to reflect the feud between two opposing forces: God’s and Satan’s. Odebunmi (2007) identifies and analyses the morphological features in religious media adverts in Nigeria. He states that the language of religious adverts is often characterized by blending, conversion, compounding, locative prefixation, derivational and inflectional suffixes.

In the present study, the focus is on the analysis of sexism in the English language used in select Nigerian Christian tracts (NCTs) by employing dominance gender approach.

Significance of the Study

Studies in the language of religious text have been focused on examining the stylistics, discourse and pragmatics in the language of sermons, liturgy, home videos, and songs (Aremu, 2013, p.10). Few studies on linguistic analysis of this genre of religious text have focused on examining the theme and rhyme as well as pragmatics in this discourse. There exists very few works on the linguistic analysis of sexisms in the English usage in NCTs. This is the vacuum in the linguistic research which this paper has been employed to fill. This study is also significant since it will expand the terrain of research in the field of language and gender in the Nigerian socio-cultural contexts.

Theoretical Perspectives

There are two major approaches to gender studies: dominance and difference. Scholars who follow these approaches believe that language practices is a central task in the study of human relationships. Dominance approach states that power relationships get articulated through language. The dominance theorists believe that language does not merely reflect a pre-existing sexist world. Instead, it actively constructs gender asymmetries within specific socio-cultural contexts (West, Lazar, & Kramarae, 1997). The dominance approach to gender research also states that male speakers use a comparative style of speech, while women use more cooperative style. Lakoff (1975), states that women use many linguistic forms which weaken or mitigate the force of their utterances. Zimmerman and West (1975), discovered that men interrupted women more than women did in thirty-one dynamic tape-recorded conversations in private residences. It was equally discovered that men were more likely not to respond in turns and topics initiated by women. Mcdonald (1980) studies husband – wife power relationships and discovers that male representation symbolizes all that is positive and powerful while
female representation symbolizes all that is negative and weak. Dominance approach underscores the fact that gender speech is socially constructed.

The difference approach to gender and language states that highly ‘feminine’ behaviour such as polite speech is not uniquely feminine. Difference approach condemns the use of indirectness as maker of powerlessness. A male speaker who plays a dominant role can equally employ indirectness in speech. The difference approach also frowns at interruption as a yardstick of male dominance. Tannen (1994) states that interruption can be employed to show enthusiastic participation in the conversation of solidarity creating connections. The difference approach scholars also condemn silence as another index of male dominance. Spender’s (1980) views have been criticized, in that men dominate women by silencing them. The difference approach scholars believe that men can equally keep mute in an interaction with their opposite sex. In this study, dominance approach to gender language has been adopted since it best explains sexism in the English usage in NCTs.

Religious tracts, as linguistic tool are often employed to show the covert and the overt meanings; as well as to praise or reprimand, to convince or set people in motion (Mey, 2001, p. 32). In addition, the linguistic communication is equally utilized as a construct of group interests (Fairclough, 1995, p.27). Language is employed by humans to establish, adjust and maintain interpersonal relations (Fairclough, 1995). This shows that language is a form of action which can generate counter-actions and reactions in form of language (Fairclough, 1989). The features of language to give the elastic meaning is embedded in the text of the Christian tracts. Dominance approach has been adopted in analysing sexisms in English usage in NCTs.

Methods

Data were collected from 40 purposively sampled tracts of (i) Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), (ii) Deeper Christian Life Ministry (DCLM), (iii) Life Oasis International Church (LOIC) and (iv) the Shepherd Ministries (TSM) were gathered to examine sexism in English usage in this genre of religious text. These tracts included 82 different titles that were printed from the DCLM at Obagado, Lagos, Nigeria. In addition, 16 titles that were printed by LOIC at their Osogbo headquarters were also collected. An additional 56 tracts from GCCG were collected from the Ebutemeta headquarters; while 18 printed tracts from TSM were also included. Ten tracts from each of the four Christian ministries were randomly selected through participant’s observation of the open-air sermons among those missions and also through the consultations of some of their senior pastors. The collection of data was achieved between August 2014 and May 2015.

From these forty sampled tracts, 25 expressions were gathered using a stratified random sampling technique to select the data for analysis. Dominance approach to gender language was adopted to analyse the data, while simple percentage statistical approach assisted data analysis.

Results and discussion

The findings revealed that sexisms in the English usage by writers of NCTs are in form of generic masculine ‘he’ and its equivalence, employment of generic noun ‘man to represent both male and female genders or to represent ‘humans’ or ‘human beings’, the employment of generic third person plural ‘they’ as a singular pronouns, and the use of the generic neutral ‘he or she’ and its equivalence like ‘him or her’. There is the absence of the use of generic neutral ‘e’ / ‘ir in the data as outlined within the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forms of sexist language in NCTs</th>
<th>Percentage distribution of Sexism in NCTs</th>
<th>Examples of sexist English in the data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i. Generic masculine ‘he’ and its equivalence</td>
<td>07 (28%)</td>
<td>(a) ‘Human thinks much about his own and about himself; Christians must avoid this so as to please God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(b) ‘A baby that is born now has his life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Percentage Distribution of Sexism in English Language used in Nigerian Christian Tracts
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The findings equally revealed that there are much employment of the masculine noun ‘man’ to represent ‘humans’ in the text of NCTS. This is similar to what happens in the biblical texts like the Book of Isaiah and others like biblical Book of Jonah, Jeremiah, etc. Sexism used in the employment of ‘man’ to represent ‘humans’ shows that women have been relegated to background in the language used in NCTS. Despite the fact that women take half of the world’s population as stated by Udofot (2009), the language used in NCT is male-biased, sexist and also a language that derogate and show women as mere appendages to their male counterparts. Examples of such sexist English from our data are the following:

Example 1: ‘No man can explain why He (God) chose to love our wretchedness in sin’.
Example 2: ‘Man has made... efforts to be at peace with God…’
Example 3: ‘He (God) doesn’t want man to remain in sin’.
Example 4: ‘God doesn’t want man to perish….’

In example one to four, the word ‘man’ is a sexist word used to represent all ‘humans.’ In the same vein, the generic pronoun ‘he’ used in the following is a sexist language.

Example 5: ‘Are you the one who has done his best to the church unnoticed: keep it up.’
Example 6: ‘The drunkard stops drinking not because he loves God... but because of insult on his personality.’
Example 7: ‘A baby that was born yesterday has his life counting down, after a year his parents celebrate his first year birthday.’

In example five to seven, the generic masculine ‘he’ and its equivalence like ‘his’ or ‘him’ has been employed as a sexist or male-biased language since the referents in each of these statements can be either male or female. It was discovered from this study that readers of NCTS often believe that they often hear God speaking directly to them through the reading of this religious text.
This always makes the linguistic communications in NCTs to be analogous to the discourse of the Holy Scriptures (Bible). The dominant and imperative expressions in NCTs often reflect the 'voice of God' to the intended audience or readers. What makes NCTs a dialogic discourse is that participants in the text often have the shared religious, socio-cultural, linguistic and situational knowledge which always leads to an easy interpretations of the writer’s intentions by the intended audience.

In the same vein, generic – neutral singular pronoun ‘they’ has been used in the following:

**Example 8:** ‘When *man* goes astray from God by *their* sins, *they* have offended God.’

**Example 9:** ‘God doesn’t want *man* to perish so he sent his own son to *everybody* so as to save *them*.’

In example eight to nine, generic neutral singular ‘they’ are used in ‘their’, ‘them’ and ‘they’. Gender linguists such as Yusuf (2004) and Nilsen (1979), have recommended that it is acceptable and grammatical to use the third person pronoun ‘they’ as a gender-neutral singular ‘they’ like those employed in example eight and nine above.

The findings equally show that the gender neutral pronoun ‘he or she’ instead of ‘she or he’ is commonly employed in NCT. This also shows that English used in NCTs is purely sexist and male biased since the pronoun ‘he’ is mentioned first in ‘he or she’ as used in the following:

**Example 10:** ‘There is nobody that dies that will not meet his or her mates in heaven or hell.’

From the above analysis, it can be observed that the use of male-biased expression by using ‘man’ to represent ‘human’ has the highest frequency (60%) in the English used in NCTs. It can be stated that the language of NCTs is gender-biased (in favour of males), sexist and not gender neutral. It equally reflects the linguistic dominance of males over females in this genre of religious text.

**Conclusion**

The language used in some NCTs is often a sexist one. In a case in which gender-neutral expression is employed e.g. in “he or she”, preference is given to males to subtly derogate, dominate, and make females mere appendages to their male counterparts. The employment of sexist English is often unconsciously utilised by writers of NCTs and it will negatively affect the wide-publicity of the religious text. This will also negatively affect the mutual acceptance of the discourse since offensive, derogatory and male-dominant language is often employed by some Nigerian Pentecostal preachers to write a religious text which has sixty-percent of its readers are predominantly female (Aremu, 2013:7).
References


