Genderlect and Language Use in a Dynamic World

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Abstract

The dynamism of the world and language can be likened to the movement of individual stars, whose constellations are continuously changing their shape. One can hardly think of any language conventionally used in any society in the world that can ever be permanently the same. None, but it will always change from one age to another. Language use therefore depends on the state of language and the world view at any point in time. The fast movement of human life span may make one to hardly notice any change in language which definitely occurs but slowly. Significantly, people are expected to use language appropriately, flexibly and accurately to enhance fidelity in communication. Since no two people speak one language the same way, there are usually noticeable differences. These differences as observed in this study, occur as a result of some factors among which are: age and education/social class, audience, gender etc. Hence this study examined the notion of genderlect and language use in a dynamic world. Some changes in language use over time have resulted in the emancipatory language used to

refer to women instead of the old days' derogatory expressions. Interestingly, what was deemed uncouth and barbarous in one age has been accounted polite and elegant in another. It was concluded, therefore, that societies should institutionalize positive attitudes where everyone is truly equal and treated as such and allow it reflect in the languages they use. This study believed that when this is done, the asymmetries that exist in language and which has been a socio-linguistic concern over the years will be of a little concern.

Introduction

The notion of a genderlect has been a major aspect of socio-linguistic discussions in recent years among scholars. During such discussions, it has been pointed out that, given a dependence social process, men and women do use language in different ways, they have different vocabularies and put their vocabularies in different kinds of sentences.

The obvious fact that male and female differ physiologically implies that their speeches differ too – they use language differently as women speak in a sexually distinct way from men. Language is what identifies us as gendered subjects. The acquisition of identity and hence subjectivity occur only when we enter into speech.

When individuals speak in characteristic ways that might be peculiar to them in certain circumstances, we term it their 'idiolect' and we reserve the word 'dialect' for the characteristic patterns of words and word-order (Lexico-grammar) which are used by a group of speakers. However, when people use language in ways that they share with many other people, we call these patterns 'sociolect'. Now, if we can talk of these 'lects', we can also talk of 'genderlect' which in this study will be used to refer to some of the apparently systematic differences in the ways men and women use language. These differences can be noticed across the whole range of linguistic variables, from plans of narrative and discourse organization, to the different accents that men and women have even from the same area (Schmitt, 2002).

In most speech situations where male and female are involved, it has been observed that there are differences in grammar, phonology and vocabulary, as well as body stances and movements that accompany speech. How then do men and women often speak differently? This does not imply that men and women speak different languages, rather, they speak different varieties of the

same language. It is important that we discuss the issue of language use in the next section.

Language Use

The possession of language makes us uniquely human and our ability to use language accurately, appropriately and flexibly makes us to be communicative competent. According to Yule (1996:197), we can be grammatically competent when we use words and structures in our language accurately. Ability to use language appropriately means that we can interpret or produce language appropriately in order to give appropriate messages and feedbacks and this is sociolinguistic competence. With such competence, a user of language knows when and where to use language. Using language flexibly implies that the user has strategic competence such that he can organize a message effectively and to compensate, via strategies, for any difficulties in what he intends to express. These abilities in language – use accuracy, appropriateness and flexibility – are key elements in communicative success – using language to do what people use it to do when they use language in a dynamic world.

Incidentally, Johnstone (2008: 268) observes that people do not actually appear to do what they do by "using" a body of "language" or "knowledge of language" or "linguistic competence" that they already possess. Instead, he feels that language seems to be created by speakers as they interact, noticing, repeating, and sometimes making reflective generalizations about what other people do, in the process of evoking and creating a world.

Language, no doubt, is a vital means human beings use in discourse and individuals learn to use it by speaking in the continual process of being and acting. To maintain continuity as well as achieve success in language use, people should constantly and strategically figure out what to say, how to say things and how to understand what others say in the process of interacting with others.

In view of this, Mey (2001: 93) explains that speech acts are produced not in the solitary philosopher's think – tank, but in the actual situations of language use, by people having something 'in mind'. Definitely, the 'something in mind' denotes people's intentions and their intentions are usually relevant and indispensable to the correct understanding and description of their utterances. Thus, intentionality is not just a matter of intentions ascribable to a particular speaker. In this regard, Searle, in Mey (2001, p. 94) maintains

that the main issue is how to establish the conditions (of sincerity, felicity etc) that make communication possible.

The language we use and the way we use language all depend on the context of the situation in which such speech acts are produced and the way we perceive the world. Many reasons have been given by previous researchers. It is therefore possible that two people using the same language may speak differently owing to number of factors to which we shall now turn.

Factors Affecting Language Use

Various factors have been observed to affect people's use of language and which result in their using the same language differently. As the world changes, people also re-adjust in their use of language as they are influenced by the following factors; social class and education, age and gender, audience, identity etc. We shall now examine them one after the other.

Social Class and Education

Actually, language use may be affected by individual's level of education. By this, we mean that a student who drops out of school to join business will end up using "low" variants of the same language, for example English, while those that attain university education will be using the "high" variant both in speaking and in writing. Nevertheless, they may use the "low" variant for ordinary conversation with family members and friends.

Social Class like the level of education also affects our language use. Kottak (2004:404) citing the principle of linguistic relativity says that "all dialects are equally effective as systems of communication which is language's main job". He opines that seeing one language as 'cruder' or 'more sophisticated' than others is a social rather than linguistic judgment. Kottak is trying to say that we usually rank certain speech patterns as 'better' or 'worse' because we recognize that they are used by groups that we also rank. This is because we can always easily recognize the low social rank or 'uneducated speech' which lead to phonological differences in language use. An instance of this is the variation in the pronunciation of 'r' which Labov (1972 b) in Yule (1996:241) and in Kottak (2004:406) summarizes as being clearly associated with prestige.

Our speech habits therefore help determine our access to employment and other material resources. In this regard, Kottak (2004:407) asserts that

"proper language itself becomes a strategic resource and a path to wealth, prestige and power".

Age and Gender

Language use may also be affected by these important factors: age and gender. This is true because younger speakers and older people living in a given geographical area use language differently. Schmitt (2002:159) after comparing some corresponding features of these speakers claims that such differences can reveal evidence of changes in the language over time. Similarly, Yule (1996:241) agrees that "variation according to 'age' is most noticeable across the grand-parent-grandchild time span".

As regards variation according to gender of the speaker, which is the crux of this study, it seems to be generally believed that women use high-prestige standard variants than men do. To lend credence to this observation, Hudson (2001:193) and Yule (1996: 242) remark that "in virtually every community, females (of every age) use high-prestige standard variants, more than males do". Meanwhile, Schmitt (2002:159) asserts that the differences in the way men and women use language can be observed across the whole range of linguistic variables, from plans and narrative and discourse organization, to the different accents they have even from the same area.

Audience

Any communication event where language is used presupposes that there is an audience, a receiver. Audience is therefore an important factor in language use as a language user always consider his audience before he chooses the suitable variety of language to use in order to achieve fidelity in communication. Schmitt (2002:159) discovers that this factor often results in speakers adjusting their accent, style or language towards their addressees. He therefore calls this phenomenon "accommodation" and sees it as an important cause of language change over time.

Mey (2001:314) in his own contribution sees such change, as mentioned above, as something that does not just happen once and for all; but that it has to be continuously negotiated and nutured, so as to prevent a relapse. Quoting Mc Connell –Ginet (1989:49), Mey asserts that "(Language) matters so much precisely because so little matter is attached to it; meanings are not given but must be produced and reproduced, negotiated in situated contexts of communication".

Audience is therefore an important factor which makes the language user to consider or 'negotiate' with his audience in their daily social and communicative relations and linguistic interactions.

Identity

This also plays a vital role in language use. People are usually identified by their individual idiocyncrasies or their linguistic patterns. Accordingly, Schmitt (2002:159) says that people's conscious awareness of their personal, ethnic, geographical, political and family identities is often a factor in their language use. Little wonder then that people use particular language patterns while trying to identify with one social group or another.

So far, we have been discussing the various factors that affect language use in different speech situations. Essentially, irrespective of differences in the way people use the same language, the essence of using language is always in their mind— that is, for communicative effect where users strive to "accommodate" one another. Thus, in order to situate this study in its proper context, it shall be carefully delimited to gender and language use hence, genderlect and language use in a dynamic world.

Genderlect and Language Use: An Overview

Genderlect is a kind of register that may become more noticeable as we mature and assume more clearly defined adult identities. McLaughlin (2006:392) relates it with the communication styles that appear to be characteristic of each gender. Tannen (1990) in McLaughlin also notes that there are characteristic differences in the way male and female communicate.

The world we live in is socially dominated by males who have accidentally, over the years, believed in linguistic oppression. In this oppressive societal condition, the powerful dominate the powerless, not only in material things, leadership roles, but also in the use of language as they (males) see it as man-made language.

Observing the changing nature of the world and language, Mey (2001:313) shows a different attitude towards the use of language. Thus, he recommends an "emancipatory" language by which he means, a "use of language that does not subscribe to the commonly established prejudices about, and skewed images of women , will change men's ways of thinking of women, while it makes women conscious of the importance of language in their lives".

Essentially, this study sees the so-called "man-made" language as an historical accident and not a natural condition that cannot be changed. Interestingly, in the literary scene, the attitude of some male writers in using derogatory language to present a negative and poor image of women has provoked a feminist movement that have succeeded in speaking the minds of females as they disprove the crude idea that "women should be seen and not heard". However, the presence of women in the world can be emphasized and protected through this seemingly insignificant small shift in the language which is yielding good dividends.

Like Trevor Pateman (1980:15), Mey (2001:313) reflects on how an outer change can affect an inner attitude and concludes that by changing a practice, we "restructure a social relationship, and (the) experience in the new social relationship thereby created… can affect the inner change". This opinion is right since any change must begin from the inside to the outside and not like a decorated white sepulchre. Naturally, the inner change will affect the outer world and promoting a change in language, (which is a social activity) is a way of telling the world that it has to change as well. This change can be enhanced by emancipatory language – a true expression of societal consciousness, one which is neither oppressed nor oppressing.

Practically too, we have to tackle the problem of oppression through the use of language that will change our society. It is not a question of mere substitution of a 'combined' pronoun such as he/she since the supposedly 'generic' *he* cannot, of itself, change a society that oppresses and under privileges its female members. A non-generic use of pronouns in English, for instance, reflects our growing consciousness of women's presence in society.

When we achieve change in language use, we definitely will achieve change in the ways society members (both male and female) speak, write and think about each other. Also, there will not be the tendency to use words that are clearly restricted in reference to one sex or the other, with female words tending to have less favourable meanings. This observation is clearly illustrated in Hudson (2001:102) using a classic pair: 'master' and 'mistress' where the male meaning is 'good' and the female is 'bad' as 'mistress' but not a 'master' is a partner for extra-marital sex. No doubt, such conceptions would not enhance growth in a dynamic world unless each sex aim at commending and accommodating one another. Let us at this juncture discuss some of the apparently systematic differences in the ways men and women use language.

Characteristic Differences in Male and Female Use of Language (Speech)

It has earlier been established in this study that men and women speech differ and the intention in this section is to examine some of the apparently systematic differences in the way they use the same language. A close look at some culture has revealed that there are much more marked differences between male and female speeches. Yule (1996:242) observes that male and female differences in speech have been marked in the ways they pronounce words (pronunciation) and in grammar. Drawing from contemporary observation on English, he asserts that there are many reported differences in the talk of males and females.

Yule is right in his report because any time we observe male and female discuss, we see that female generally express their personal feelings more than men who seem to prefer non-personal topics like sports and news. They use the same language differently because, while women would like to express their domestic experiences, marital or emotional problems that are similar to the other woman's, men would either respond to an expression of feelings or problems by giving advice on solutions.

In his own opinion, McLaughlin (2006:392) asserts that women tend to be less direct or confrontational in their use of language than men who tend to use more intimidating behaviours such as interrupting others, making direct eye contact and displaying body language that suggest dominance. He further observes that where men seem to be more topic focused, women seem to focus more on people and are more receptive to their non-verbal cues.

Considering the above views, it becomes obvious that with changing roles and opportunities in the workplace for women, these differences may be increasingly blurred. The dynamism of language use and the world has today, more than before created greater opportunities for women to assume professional positions, leadership roles and administrative responsibilities. In Nigeria for instance, we have Prof. Dora Akunyili, Minister for Information and Communication, Dr. Ngozi Okonjo Iwuala, former Minister for Finance, to mention but a few, who are in political as well as academic sectors. Certainly, the intimidating and wrong expression that "women education ends in the kitchen" has changed with the changing nature of our nation and the world in general.

This gradual change is what McLaughlin (2006:292) observes and says that: "men see that the ambition to succeed "in a man's world" is just one option...many men are assuming the roles of raising children and providing domestic support for their wives as they pursue professional careers".

This is a clear picture of what is happening in many homes now where a woman is, may be, pursuing one academic degree or the other or has one leadership appointment or the other, which is deemed 'good' for the family, the husband is usually, involved in taking care of the family affairs in her absence. If things move in this trend over time, this study believes that the nature of genderlect could be altered. Already, the changes in the world and the use of language have been altered, to a great extent, especially most of the derogatory (abusive) words with sexual undertones males used to refer to females. Recently, women are no more simply "house-wives" who are only meant "to be seen and not to be heard", but with the turn of events, most women have turned out to be bread-winners of their homes and the term 'house-husband' is being used reflecting changes in social customs.

Fromkin et al (2003:482) in their attempt to differentiate men and women speech drew from Balloon xxii (6) view about a business men and women:

> A businessman is aggressive, a business-woman is pushy.

> A businessman is good on details; she's picky… He follows through; she doesn't know when to quit. He stands firm; she's hard… His judgments are her prejudices. He is a man of the world; she's been around. He isn't afraid to say what is on his mind; she's mouthy. He exercises authority diligently; she's power mad. He's close mouthed; she's secretive. He climbed the ladder of success, she slept her way to the top.

With this citation, Fromkin et al opine that words of a language are not intrinsically good or bad, but reflect individual or societal values.

Essentially, language is creative, malleable, and ever changing. Thus, a word can be used by a speaker to connote positive idea while another will select a different word of the same language to connote negative idea about the same person. In the words of Fromkin et al (2003:481), "the very epithets used by a majority to demean a minority may be reclaimed as terms of bonding and

friendship among members of the minority". The truth is that people's cultural and societal views may sometimes be reflected in the words we use to refer to certain individuals.

It is also pertinent here to note that most of the asymmetries we make between male and female terms in many languages are simultaneously changing with the world change. Fromkin et al (2003:484) make one striking discovery about such asymmetries   when there are male/female pairs. According to them, the male form for the most part is unmarked while the female term is created by adding a bound morpheme or by compounding. They however listed the following pairs to lend credence to their claim:

Male	Female
Actor	Actress
Prince	Princess
Poet	Poetess
Author	Authoress
Hero	Heroine,
etc.	

The inevitability of change has resulted in the 'emancipatory language' especially with the advent of the feminist movement such that many female forms have been replaced by the male forms, which are now used to refer to either sex. This tells why today, we can conveniently refer to both men and women as authors, actors, heroes, etc. Interestingly also, it was rare to talk of "Dr. Mrs. Chukwu" but the dynamic use of words in this dynamic world, especially in relation to gender, now enables us to talk of "Dr. Mrs. Chukwu". The intimidating expression used to be "Dr. and Mrs. Chukwu" even though both individuals have directorial degrees.

Practically, male and female in their interactions exhibit distinctive styles _ what Hudson (2001:141) refers to as "Interaction styles". He however, opines that generally, men are more concerned with power and women with solidarity. Quoting Tannen (1990:24-5) Hudson feels that:

> For men, conversations are negotiations in which people try to achieve and maintain the upper hand if they can, and protect themselves from others' attempt

> to put them down and push them around. Life, then, is a contest, a struggle to preserve independence and avoid failure.

While for women he says:

> Conversations are negotiations for closeness in which people try to seek and give confirmation and support, and to reach concensus. They try to protect themselves from others' attempt to push them away. Life, then, is a community, a struggle to preserve intimacy and avoid isolation. Though there are hierarchies in this world too, they are hierarchies more of friendship than of power and accomplishment.

It can be deduced from the above that females give priority to solidarity and concentrate on building and maintaining the social bonds that hold communities together while males prefer power, the struggle for independence.

Similarly, Kottak (2004: 404 – 5), drawing from Lakoff's idea agree that the use of words and expressions has been associated with women's traditional lesser power in some societies like America where men's customary use of "forceful" words reflects their traditional public power and presence. As for women, they are more likely to use such adjectives as *adorable, charming, sweet, cute, lovely and divine* than men are.

Our distinction may still take us back to the domains of sports and color terminology as we try to differentiate the way men and women use language. Kottak in his observation believes that:

> Men typically know more terms related to sports, make more distinctions among them (e.g., runs versus points), and try to use the terms more precisely than women do. Correspondingly, influenced more by the fashion and cosmetics industries than men are, women use more color terms and attempt to use them more specifically than men do.

Sometimes too, men and women have different paralinguistic systems and move and gesture differently. As Wardhaugh (1998:314 – 5) discovers, these often require women to appear to be submissive to men and to be silent in situations in which men may speak. In his words, "but the ideal wife is silent in the presence of her husband, and at gatherings where men are, she should talk only in a whisper, if she talks at all".

A thought about how this world would have been if women were still subjected to this condition of not being heard reveals that it would be chaotic especially now that women want their voices to be heard. The change in language use is equally changing men's world view about women.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the dynamism of the world is necessitated by that of language and the way it is used irrespective of sex. Thus, we cannot perceive the world without becoming aware of our world, and realizing this awareness in the form of language. Words of a language are therefore essentially used to word the world or become aware of the world of people: we can only become language users through the social use of language to interact with our environment. Once language is created in this social environment, once the world has been worded, our wording creates a shared world-picture. Whenever we do something appropriately with the words, we perform an activity that (intentionally) brings about a change in the existing state of affairs (performative utterances). Thus, we can word the world in order to cause change.

One important implication of this study is that every individual (male or female) needs to fashion a suitable style as well as respect his medium, that is language use, by which he can best represent his understanding or perception of the other and of his age. By implication, speakers should adjust their accent, style or language towards their addressees in order to accommodate one another. Potentially, we can now observe some changes in progress, which were not thought possible in the past. This study believes that all living languages are subject to change and agrees with Algeo and Pyles (2004, p.10) that "change is the normal state of language. Every language is constantly turning into something different and when we hear a new word or a new pronunciation or a novel use of an old word, we may be catching the early stages of change. This is why Algeo and Pyles observe that change is natural because a language system is culturally transmitted.

Recommendation

 This paper likens language to other conventional matters such as fashions of clothing, cooking, entertainment etc and asserts that language is constantly undergoing revision, though slower than some other cultural activities. This work therefore recommends that individuals should move along with this change and institutionalize positive attitudes where everyone is truly equal and treated as such and allow it reflect in the languages they use. There is no doubt that if this is imbibed, the asymmetries that exist in language and which has been a socio-linguistic concern over the years will be of a little concern.

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