

LANGUAGE AS A TOOL OF DISCRIMINATION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF SEXISM IN DAGBANLI

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ABSTRACT

The unequal representation of males and females in the use of language has been extensively studied in languages such as English. These studies show that in many ways languages discriminate against women, create negative stereotypes of women, reinforce negative attitudes against women and deprecate womanhood whilst valourising manhood. This paper makes an exploratory survey of the linguistic representation of males and females in Dagbanli by examining ordinary everyday discourse. The study shows that statements that speakers of the language make in everyday speech about men and women reveal a tendency to represent men and everything associated with maleness as superior, and women and everything associated with femaleness as inferior. This unequal representation in language does not only depict male-female stereotypes but does so in a negative even as it serves to re-affirm male dominance in the Dagbon society.

KEY DESCRIPTORS: Sexist language, Over-lexicalization, Stereotyping, Asymmetrical Meaning, Male Dominance.

INTRODUCTION

Sexism and sexist language are terms used in to refer to language usage that excludes women in its reference or implicitly suggests that maleness and masculine values are positive, normal or superior and the standard for humanity. At the opposite end is the suggestion that femaleness and feminine values are negative, sub- or non-standard, deviant and/or inferior.

In the English Language the phenomenon of sexism has been very well illustrated in the literature. The commonest example that is often cited is the generic use of *man* and the third person pronouns *he/his/him*.

- i) *Man* is a social being.
- ii) A doctor must not disclose the nature of *his* patient's illness to others.
- iii) If anyone comes looking for me, tell *him* I've closed for the day.

Though English grammarians maintain that *man*, *his*, and *him* as used in these examples refer to both males and females, students of language and gender argue that they tend to create a sense of exclusion of females as they bring only male images to mind (Doyle, 1995). Similarly, it is contended that the use of *man* in occupational designations like *mailman*, *fireman*, *chairman* and *postman* tends to make such occupations appear to be exclusively for males.

It has also been noted that though the English Language sometimes has masculine and feminine pairs of words, these pairs are often asymmetrical in meaning, (McArthur, 1992). For example, *governor* refers to a man with great power and position, and *governess* to a woman employee with limited authority over children; a drum *major* is the (male) leader of a marching band; a drum *major*ette is a girl who marches in front of a band waving a long stick. In these pairs, the masculine forms are unmarked; they are assumed as the basic forms, the norm, whilst the feminine forms are marked usually with the suffix *-ess* or *-ette* to set them apart. Indeed, according to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1982), the suffix *-ette* does not only mean (1) female; but also has such negative connotations as (2) small, diminutive as in (*kitchenette*) (*cigarette*), and (3) imitation, artificial, substitute as in (*leatherette*).

It has also been noted that there exists in everyday English usage, in the news media and in literary works a profusion of words, many of them pejorative or trivial, for the designation of women (Fowler 1991). Women are trivialised by being labeled with words for foods (*dish*, *cookie*, *tart*, *cheesecake*, *sugar*, *spice*, a *cute tomato*, *honey*, *sweetie pie*) or other pleasurable items *butterflies*, *little dolls*, and parents give their daughters names as *Candy* and *Cherry* or *Rose*, *Lily*, *Ivy*, *Iris* and *Petunia* (Nilsen 1977). In Ghana, Koforidua, the capital town of the Eastern Region was once famed for its *flowers* (girls).

Sexism in the English language goes beyond the use and meanings of words. It is, as Cameron (1998) notes, 'a multifaceted phenomenon taking different forms in different representational practices'. In normal everyday use of language, in legal, religious and literary works, in the media and in school textbooks language is used to define male and female roles in society or male and female characteristics, create male and female stereotypes and represent males and females in ways that fit these stereotypes (Coates 1986, Doyle, 1995, Cameron 1998). A boy is encouraged or commanded to 'be a man!', and *to be a man* is to be honourable, strong, righteous, bold, daring and whatever else the speaker thinks is desirable. But in contrast to this, a girl is never told to be a *woman*. Being a woman is often perceived as condemning. Hence, the preferred choice is *lady*. When a female is told to be a *lady* 'she is simply being encouraged to "act feminine," which means sitting with her knees together, walking gracefully, and talking softly' " (Nilsen, 1977).

In an analysis of newspaper language, Fowler (1991) examines representations of gender, power, authority and law and order, and argues that newspaper language categorises persons in the news and puts them in 'groups' each with its own set of

characteristics that are defined by a set of operative linguistic structures. For women, these characteristics include 'irrationality, familial dependence, powerlessness and sexual and physical excess'. Clark (1998) also shows that in the reportage of sexual violence in a British newspaper, *The Sun*, even when women are the victims of the violence, linguistic structures (naming, transitivity) are manipulated to put the blame on the victims.

Bosmajian (1997) demonstrates, with examples from the legislature and court judgments from the US, that the language of law and politics has treated women as inferior to men and has systematically 'kept women in their place' by defining, labeling and stereotyping them as (1) mother and wife, (2) infantile and incompetent, (3) seductive and immoral, and (4) non-persons and nonentities. He cites numerous statutes, judgments, and legal arguments to illustrate each of these. An example is this 1966 declaration by the Mississippi Supreme Court in upholding a statute which excluded women from jury duty in the suit *State v. Hall*: "the legislature has the right to exclude women so they may continue their service as mothers, wives, and homemakers (in some areas they are still on a pedestal) from the filth, obscenity, and noxious atmosphere that so often pervades a court room during a jury trial."

Male characters dominate the pages of literature and history. As Gershuny (1997) puts it the heroic figures that 'revealed virtues, unfolded quests, and named the world all had the faces of men'

WHY SHOULD WE BE CONCERNED ABOUT SEXIST LANGUAGE?

Concern about the use of sexist language is at the heart of the debate about the relationship between language, thought and reality. This is particularly so of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which postulates that the structures of different languages determine the conceptions of reality peculiar to the different speech-communities. In this view, language does more than simply describe reality; it serves to shape the reality of a culture; it determines how speakers perceive the world around them. (Whorf 1976, Wardhaugh 1992)

Though many linguists and anthropologists reject a direct link between language and the conception of reality, there is some agreement in the view that language 'is not a neutral vehicle in the representation of reality' (Ehrlich and King, 1998); it reflects and reinforces certain assumptions about reality (Cameron 1985, Lee 1992, Gumperz and Levinson 1995). Feminists and students of language and gender therefore argue that to the extent that our lives are carried on in language, sexist assumptions about male/female characteristics and relations will be re-enacted and reinforced by the use of sexist language. (Spender 1980, Coates 1986). As a major component of human culture, language encodes a culture's preoccupation and its values. It is one of the means by which the norms and values of a culture are transmitted to future generations and it helps teach children the roles that are expected of them. Through language children conceptualize their ideas and feelings about themselves and their

world. What a language tells its users about women and men and about the relationships between the two must therefore be a subject of legitimate concern and interest to society.

IS THIS PHENOMENON UNIQUE TO THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE?

With these insights from the literature on sexist usage in the English language, it would be a worthwhile exercise to make an exploratory survey of our local languages to identify similar linguistic forms and usage and how these could help us appreciate the role of language in gender relations and attitudes in our cultures. It is the assumption of this writer that in Northern Ghana where the cultures of the people are the traditional patriarchal types, there will be much sexist usage in the language of the people.

For the purpose of this paper, I select only one language, Dagbanli, which I am more familiar with, being a native speaker. Dagbanli belongs to the family of languages of Northern Ghana called the Gur Languages (Dakubu 1988). This language family includes Dagaari, Gurune, Mampurli, and Nanuni. The cultures and languages of these people are so similar that what this survey finds in Dagbanli may, to a very large extent, be true of these other languages, though a similar study of the other languages may be necessary to confirm this.

Unlike English, Dagbanli has very few written texts, so the examples cited are all drawn from everyday usage. They are statements that one hears on a regular basis mainly from adult males and even male children. Some are proverbs, which, in traditional African discourse is highly regarded as a noble genre, and the embodiment of a people's wisdom and philosophy of life (Ssetuba, 2005). Listener contributions to radio discussions on the relationships between males and females, a popular theme on all the FM stations in Tamale, have also been a source for some of the examples used in this paper.

TEACHING BOYS TO BE MEN

In the formative years of their lives, male and female children in Dagbon hear language that leaves them in no doubt about what their society expects them to be and how to behave. When a young boy cries either out of pain or for some other reason he is told not to cry because:

1. *Doo bi kuhira.* - A man does not cry.

The implication is clear; only women cry. The young boy may further be rebuked thus,

2. *Paga n'nyaa ka a kuhira?* - Are you a woman to be crying?

With these statements the young boy is being taught to be tough, and that crying is a sign of not being tough, a weakness that is only fit for a woman. Speakers of the language often make a statement depicting someone as having or showing a particular type of behavior and then go on to add another statement that indicates that the particular behaviour is expected only in a woman.

3. *A mahim pam; paga n'nyaa?* - You are too sluggish; are you a woman?
4. *A zori dabem pam; paga n'nyaa?* - You are too cowardly; are you a woman?
5. *O zabri nyuli pam; o nmanla paga.* - He is full of jealousy; he is like a woman.

Thus, sluggishness, cowardice and jealousy are characteristics not desirable in a man, but appropriate for a woman. Statements like the above are common in Dagbanli, and their pattern is almost the same, consisting of two co-ordinate clauses; the first makes a statement that shows a male to be exhibiting a negative attitude or behavior followed by another clause that indicates that the attitude or behavior in question is only characteristic of women.

No other reason is ever given to a young boy why he should not cry beyond the mundane reason that he is not a woman. In this way, young children are, without direct instruction, being socialized to recognize the attitudes and roles associated with their sex.

NOTIONS ABOUT WOMEN AND GENDER RELATIONS

Whatever the activity people engage in, any performance that is considered to be mediocre is described as woman's performance. For example, in the game of *wali* (called *oware* in Akan and played mostly, but not exclusively, by men), a very skilful player is expected to keep track of all marbles that go into each of the six holes on his side, so that at every turn of his, he makes a move without having to count his marbles. An unskillful player cannot do this; and sometimes even a good player under pressure may need to count the marbles in a hole before making a move. A player who does this before moving will often be ridiculed by the opponent as playing like a woman:

6. *Di tori ma paga wali.* - Don't play me a woman's *oware*.

The simplest game in *wali* is played usually by children because it does not require sophisticated skills, but it is shunned by male adults. Men condescendingly call this game *pagbi wali* (women's *wali*). Thus, any task that is seen as requiring little or no skills is a 'women's task', whilst mediocrity, lack of experience or skill in doing things is regarded as characteristic of women.

Women are not only graded as being mediocre performers, but they are often represented in the speech of men as less than human or not human at all.

7. *Paga huna bin' kobgu.*- As for woman; (she is) an animal.
8. *Paga mini wohu nye la yim: a yi bi bar'o, a mi ni vo' o.* - A woman and a horse are the same; if you are not riding her, then you must pull her (on a leash).

The second statement is a proverb and its lesson is that a woman has to be under some form of control at all times. The proverb is a powerful genre in African discourse because of its 'claim of general and absolute truth' Ssetuba (2005). So the depiction of women in proverbs in such terms becomes, by this claim to 'absolute truthfulness', a powerful tool for a predominantly patriarchal society to sustain male dominance.

At best a woman is like a child; frivolous and gullible, and not to be taken seriously. She is credited with no sense and is best handled by being deceived or lied to. The following examples demonstrate these representations of women in Dagbanli:

9. *Paga hun mini bia nyela yim; o bori la yohim.* - A woman and a child are the same; she prefers deception.
10. *Paga d'hankali bi zilma.* - A woman's intelligence is not deep.
11. *Paga bori la zhiri.* - A woman prefers to be lied to.
12. *A yi bori paga, ka yeli o yelmangli a ku lahi nya o.*- If you are courting a woman and you tell her the truth (about yourself) you will never get her.

It may be argued that women probably also use similar sexist language about men. The difference is that men seem to be more brazen in the use of such language than women. Men speak this way about women in any context; either in a male-male or male-female interaction, whilst women could only use similar language about men in a female-female interaction. A man will use such derogatory language even to his wife, but many women could never do the same to their husbands.

Even when a man finds a woman who is desirable as a partner, the woman (especially if she is a young woman who has never married) still remains a child.

13. *N' nyela bia bori Tamale.*- I have found a child that I am courting in Tamale⁴.

⁴ Sometimes the word *paga* (woman) may be used instead of *bia* (child).

“KEEPING WOMEN IN THEIR PLACE”

Language is also a means by which men exercise and maintain control over women. The language of men does not merely reflect the authority they wield over women, but also ensures that they continue to exercise control over women. Women are represented as incapable of rational thinking; they cannot know what is good for them, and so someone (a man) must do the thinking for them.

14. *Niri yi tse paga suhuyubu ti o, o ni pii ti' gburigu.* - If you leave a woman to follow her mind, she will choose a (tree) stump. (i.e., a woman is not capable of making a sound choice (usually of a partner) for herself.
15. *Paga hun kuli bori la yoli.* - (All that) a woman wants is worthlessness. - (i.e., a woman's choice is always worthless)

Men sometimes say this when they want to justify the use of force to compel a woman to marry a man of their (the men's) choice, or when they are exasperated with a female relation who will not be talked out of a relationship with a man they consider to be a worthless person, or a woman who follows her own mind in any action with which they (men) do not agree. What makes this statement even more discriminatory is that men who exhibit similar stubbornness are not characterized in similar disparaging language. Secondly, in the second statement, there is usually a pun on the word *yoli*. When that word is pronounced with a low tone on the first syllable and a high tone on the second syllable, *yoli*- it means 'penis.' Thus with that tonation the statement is also intended to carry the double meaning: '(All that) a woman wants is penis', i.e. a woman is only good as a sex object.

A newly married man will be advised with the proverb quoted earlier thus:

16. *Paga hmanla ziha; o ni na maha la, ka a pori t'o.* - A woman is like a fish; you have to coil it up while it is still fresh⁵.

The man is being advised to establish control over his woman right from the beginning of their relationship; otherwise, like the fish, when the relationship takes a definite shape the man can no longer transform it to his desire.

There is awareness, even in traditional Dagbong society, that access to economic resources gives one some measure of control over one's personal affairs. In this society where the man is seen as the one who must have control over all things and at all times, men must ensure that women remain economically subservient to them. The advice men often give to their fellow men is:

⁵ Fresh fish, especially mud fish, which has a slim long body is coiled up and bound before being smoked.

17. *Paga hun bi simsi ka o nya ligri gari doo.*- It is not proper for a woman (wife) to have more money than a man (husband).
18. *Paga yi nya ligri, nyin dim kuli.*-When a woman (your wife) becomes wealthy, kill it (spend all of it).

The last statement was recorded during a radio discussion programme on the changing role of women in a traditional society which is confronted by changing economic demands. It was made by a participant as a prescription to men not to allow their wives to become rich as a result of the widely held view among Dagbamba men that when a woman begins to make money and starts to acquire property, she begins to 'get out of control'.

The language and attitudes of men in Dagbong society have so effectively conditioned women to accept their status of powerlessness to the extent that the language of women themselves sometimes reflects this acceptance. Sometimes when confronted with a situation where her views ought to be sought, a woman may give up this right with the rhetorical question.

19. *Paga mi mal' la yeligu?* - Has a woman a say?

With this, the woman gives up her right to participate in making a decision, even when the decision to be taken concerns her personally or her own children. This is the type of situation Apusigah (2004) describes when she writes, 'Even when invited to share their views, in many cases they concur or say they have nothing to say or add.'

Young newly married women are advised by both mothers and fathers to be at the beck and call of their husbands and to be prompt in their service to them.

20. *A yi dana yi bol' a yim; nyin sagmi bu woi.* - When your husband calls you once; respond nine times. (Do not delay in responding to your husband's commands.)

Men in their speech do not only refuse to credit women with intelligence and other positive qualities, but also represent them as unworthy of trust and even as treacherous partners. The following statements and others like them will often be heard in discussions about men and women or as advice from one male to another male.

21. *Paga ka nuani.* - (A) woman cannot be relied on.
22. *Paga yi bah a daashili, a zhi a zagim.*- If a woman discovers your secret, then you are left naked. (If you have a secret never tell it to your wife, she will expose you or put your life at risk)

VOCABULARY

It has been noted above that in English, words that have masculine and feminine forms do not necessarily have equivalent meanings. Besides identifying the object being referred to by the words as female, the feminine forms sometimes have additional and often derogatory meanings. In Dagbanli there are also a number of masculine/feminine pairs of words which, do not only identify their referents as male or female, but also carry asymmetrical values, with the masculine forms connoting positive values and the feminine forms having negative values. Examples include:

23. *dokurugu* - 'old man' (pl. *dokura*);

24. *pakurugu* - 'old woman' (pl. *pakura*).

However, *pakurugu* also means witch, hag.

In Dagbong, as in any Ghanaian society, people respect and revere a *dokurugu*, but hate and fear the *pakurugu*. It pays to be kind and close to a *dokurugu*, for he can share his wisdom with you, but it is not safe to be too familiar with a *pakurugu*; she hurts those who are nice to her. This belief is expressed by the saying:

25. *Pakurugu dze hun nihdi o nirlim*. - A witch doesn't like one who is kind to her.

Young men hear this admonition all the time, to be wary of old women and not to defend them (not even their own mothers) when they are accused of witchcraft. Thus when an old woman is accused of witchcraft⁶, as frequently happens, she is disowned by her own kith and kin and is banished from her community or becomes a victim of lynching.

Other male/female word pairs that have unequivocal meanings are:

25. *dotali* (*Dablim*)- manliness.

26. *pagtali*- womanliness

Associated with *dotali* or *dablim* are attributes like strength, daring, fearlessness, and industry, whilst attributes that are associated with *pagtali* are clumsiness, indecision, childishness etc. It is usually not expected of a woman to exhibit the qualities of *dotali*. When she does the biggest compliment that will be paid her is an expression of regret that she is not a man:

⁶The belief is that the powers of witchcraft do not want their existence to be challenged. Anyone who denies their existence will become their victim to prove their existence.

27. *Yoli n poogi o.* - She only lacks a penis.

(i.e she is worthy to be man, but for the fact that she has no penis)

Further examples are illustrated below:

28a. *dakoli/pakoli*

Dakoli means bachelor, whether the person so referred to has never been married, is divorced or widowed. The feminine form of *dakoli* is *pakoli*, but unlike *dakoli*, *pakoli* means only one thing, a widow. A woman who has never married or is divorced is not a *pakoli*. A man who is a *dakoli* in any of the three meanings above is considered a desirable match for any woman. However, a *pakoli* (widow) is often an object of fear, and many men will hesitate before proposing to marry one. As for the divorced woman she has other but equally deprecatory names like,

28b. *pag' zhinli* - a woman whose marital status is not known and who is thus considered a suitable target for men.

28c. *bazawara* - a divorced woman, especially one who has had children from her previous marriage.

29. *dagorli/pagorli* : *Dagorli* is a man with strong a libido and *pagorli* is a woman with a similar urge; however, when a man is called *dagorli* it is a recognition and an approval of his prowess in conquering women, but when a woman is called *pagorli* she is seen as a slut or nymphomaniac, who must be condemned.

LABELS OF IDENTIFICATION

In the absence of an exact system for reckoning people's ages, Dagbanli employs a number of labels in order to give an idea of a person's age or level of maturity; or to show how responsible he or she is. The labels for males focus on a different set of qualities than those for females. To show that a male is an adult, or is a responsible person, he may be designated as

30. *pag' lana* - owner of a wife (a married person) or as the case may be in the polygamous Dagomba society the focus may be on the number of wives the person has, e.g.

31. *pagba ata lana* - owner of three wives

For the same purposes a woman may be labelled as :

32. *doo yili lana* - belonging to man's house (a married woman) or

35. *dogim buta lana* - (a woman) of three births;(i.e. the number of times she has had babies).

The two sets of labels reflect the society's construction of the roles of the two sexes. A man 'owns' a woman, or several of them. A woman's identity is however tied to a man; she belongs to a man's house. She can also be categorized in terms of what the society considers as her main role, producing children. That label however puts her at a disadvantage if, for any reason, she has to remarry, because men associate the number of times a woman has had children with her age. On the other hand a man who may have three times as many children as the woman is not disadvantaged by any reference to the number of his children.

GENDERED IMPLICATIONS OF SEXIST LANGUAGE IN DAGBANLI

I have noted above that it is widely accepted that language is 'not a neutral vehicle in the representation of reality (Erich and King, 1998). Language, according to Fowler (1991) and Cameron (1998) is ideological and a social semiotic code, which imposes a structure of values held by its users on whatever is represented and influences attitudes and behaviour (Doyle, 1998). This is precisely the reason why we are often reminded to 'mind our language.' Clearly, any person who can make a generalized statement about women as the example given earlier and reproduced below is in no way representing reality.

- (7) *Paga huna bin' kobgu*. - As for woman; she is an animal.

Yet, continued repetition of such expressions both as speakers and hearers, reinforces cultural evaluations that enhance the status of males and devalue females. The corollary of denying human attributes in a woman is the refusal to acknowledge her ability or right to participate meaningfully in many societal activities. Husbands will not seek their wives' views on matters that affect the whole family because:

36. *Paga mi bela saawara ni?* Is a woman worthy of counsel?

In other words it is not worth it to seek a woman's views, and a man who does so will be labeled *do chogfu* (a useless man). It is the same reasoning that the larger society uses to exclude women from decision making in matters that affect the whole community although it must be acknowledged that there is now an increasing willingness to include women in such processes.

Female education also suffers greatly partly as a result of negative representation of the educated woman.

37. *Paga shikuri nyela yoli* - A woman's school (i.e. education) is of no use.

This statement reflects a number of views about the education of girls and greatly influences the decision of parents to send or not to send their girls to school. In the

past the view was that girls are not intelligent enough and do not do well at school, so sending a girl to school was (yoli) a waste of time and resources. The second view was informed by economic considerations, and reflected the utilitarian expectations of the people from education. Even if a girl did well, she would marry and leave the family and all the resources expended on her education would be lost (bahi yoli). Another view was that education delays a girl's marriage or makes her a 'bad' wife, which of course, means a wife who would, for instance, want her views too to be heard. Such statements as in (37) were therefore used by men to defend their refusal to send their daughters to school and to dissuade others from sending their daughters to school.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted an exploratory look at ordinary everyday Dagbanli speech representation of men and women and their roles. It has been found that many forms of representation of women in speech is sexist; discriminate against women by valorizing maleness and deprecating femaleness, and present women as unintelligent and sub-human. Words that have masculine and feminine forms do not often carry equivalent meanings; the feminine forms invariably have negative connotations, whilst some put women at a disadvantage. These findings suggest that sexist language may not be a peculiarity of the English Language. It also suggests strongly that other Ghanaian Languages may exhibit such features.

There is therefore the need for the recognition of what sexist language is, the existence of sexist language use in our languages as has been demonstrated with Dagbanli, and the implications of such language use.

Increased awareness of sexist language and its recognition as a gender issue lead to conscious efforts by users of the English language to avoid such language. Business organizations and institutions in the US, the United Kingdom, Canada and other English speaking countries now have guidelines for their members on avoiding sexist language and using gender neutral language. Grammar books and dictionaries include notes on usage that may be considered sexist.

These examples have to be followed in the use of our local languages if we are to find a more holistic solution to the problem of discrimination based on gender and address the male-female power imbalances in our societies. Providing equal opportunities in education to males and females, increasing women's representation in political institutions or empowering women economically cannot alone solve the problems of gender based discrimination if people continue to talk in ways that create and reinforce a lower esteem for women. The person who says *Paga huna bin' kobgu* (as for woman; she is an animal) is not likely to acknowledge a woman's right to education, dignity, or any other rights.

Gender advocates in particular need to take a greater interest in the use of our local languages, as their counterparts did for the English Language and include in their

programmes the creation of awareness of sexist speech and its implications for the issue of gender and social equity.

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