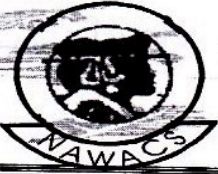


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# SEX DIFFERENTIATION IN LANGUAGE USE : A CASE STUDY OF SOME IBIBIO TERMS

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## ABSTRACT :

*Biological factors, such as sex, have been found to influence many human activities, including language use. Men and women use differently, and in some languages, word choice seems to discriminate between sexes. This paper highlights statistically significant word choice in Ibibio that are sex-based and attempts to explain the reasons for the distinctions. It concludes with a call for a better perception of womanhood in view of the changing social structures.*

## INTRODUCTION

Biological factors, such as sex have been to influence many human activities. Some educational psychologists believe, for instance, that sex is "the most basic and all pervasive determinant of human behaviour from infancy through adulthood" (Seller, 1981;367). This goes to show that sex difference necessitates differences in every other aspect of life, including language. Sex differences of various dimensions have been attested in various languages of the world. This paper concerns itself with sex –related difference in languages, paying particular attention to word choice in Ibibio that have prejudicial connotation against women.

## SEX DIFFERENCES IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

The international Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) study of French as a foreign language showed that more female than male students chose to study French, and that in cases where the sex of the student accounted for any significant difference in French language achievement, girls proved superior (Finn, Dulberg & Reiss 1979). Similarly, in high schools of Europe, females are over-represented in literature, arts, and languages, while males predominate in mathematic and science (Finn, Dulberg & Reiss, 1979).

Killer's (1981) study, aimed at identifying the characteristics likely to predict success in language learning showed that sex is a significant factor. To come nearer home, the admission pattern in the Department of Languages and



tics of the University of Calabar since its inception in 1979 shows that females have almost always outnumbered males. Available records given below lend credence to this assertion.

**Table 1: *Statistics Of Students' Admission Into The French Section Of The Department Of Languages & Linguistics, University Of Calabar (Stratified According To Sex)***

ACADEMIC YEAR	NO. OF MALES ADMITTED	NO. OF FEMALES ADMITTED	TOTAL NO OF STUDENTS ADMITTED
1991/92	24(52.17%)	22(47.83%)	46(100%)
1992/93	3(20%)	12(80%)	15(100%)
1993/94	6(21.43%)	22(78.57%)	28(100%)
1995/96	9(12.68%)	62(87.32%)	71(100%)
1996/97	9(18%)	41(82%)	50(100%)
1997/98	8(12.50%)	56(87.50%)	64(100%)
1998/99	8(8.99%)	81(91.01%)	89(100%)
TOTAL	67(18.46%)	296(81.54%)	363(100%)

The data in table 1 above shows that except for the 1991/92 session, more females than males had been admitted into the Department of Languages & Linguistics of the University of Calabar during the seven sessions for which data were made available to us. On the whole, a total of 296 females representing 81.54% of the total intake were admitted during the seven academic years in question as against 67 males, representing only 18.46% of the total intake, admitted during the same period. From personal interaction with the students we found out that most of the male students had chosen to study French as a last resort, having failed to gain admission to read Law or Political Science.

## **SEX-BASED MORPHOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES IN LANGUAGE**

One dimension of linguistic sex differentiation is in morphology. Wardhaugh (1989) reports that in Japanese, a male speaker refers to himself as "wasi" or "ore" while a female speaker refers to herself as "watasi" or "atashi". While a male speaker of Thai refers to himself as "phom", a female speaker of the same language uses "dichan" (Wardhaugh, 1989). Similar differences are also attested in some Nigerian languages. For example, in Hausa, a male speaker refers to himself as "nine" while a female speaker refers to herself as "niche". The second person in a discourse situation (you) is referred to as "ke" if female, and as "kai" if male



Linguis(personal communication with a Hausa speaker).

Another dimension of linguistic sex differentiation is attested among the Carib Indians of the West Indies, where male and female Caribs are said to speak different languages as a result of a conquest in which a group of invading Carib-speaking men killed the local Arawak-speaking men and mated with the Arawak women (Wardhaugh, 1989). A similar differentiation is attested in Ubbang, a Bendi Cross River language spoken in Obudu, Cross River State (Opoola, 1995).

## SEX-BASED DIFFERENCES IN LANGUAGE USE

Going by the extensive literature on language in relation to sex, numerous researchers have described men's and women's speech as being different from each other Wardhaugh (1989) asserts that males and females often exhibit different ranges of verbal skills. Okon (2000) notes that Ibibio women are very resourceful in verbal skills, and this resourcefulness is manifested in their use (most often spontaneous) of folk songs to express Ibibio traditional and cultural values.

In a study of linguistic sex differentiation in varieties of urban American English, Trudgill (1989) explains that women have more linguistic awareness than men, one of the reasons being that women are more closely involved in the transmission of culture (to their children). Because they are anxious about their children acquiring prestige norms, they (the women) are more conscious of their speech than do the men.

Lakoff's (1986:414) study concludes that "there is a women's language in American English" which has nothing to do with purely linguistic grammar, but rather with hierarchical acceptability, that is, that some sentences are better for women to say in some circumstances. The studies cited above, and many lend evidence to the fact that there are differences (phonological, morphological and lexical) between the speech of men and women.

In Ibibio, subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) distinctions are made in the vocabulary choice used to describe women and men, and in that used by men and women. Some of these words, particularly those used to describe women, carry some prejudice and this should not surprise us, as we are concerned with a predominantly patriarchal society. This paper will examine the use and social implications of a few of such words.

## THE DATA

**VOCABULARY USED TO DESCRIBE MEN AND WOMEN:** In Ibibio, certain terms, which are used to describe women, do not have masculine forms even though men could find themselves in the same situation as the women. A word that readily comes to mind in this regard is "ebekpa", Meaning, "widower". There is no equivalent term like "nwaan-akpa" which would



mean a widow". Though the term "widower" exists in English, a statement such as "He's Sally's widower" is not acceptable, but one can say, She's Fred's widow" (Wardhangh, 1989:305).

Certain derogatory terms used to describe women are not used to describe men, even though men could be guilty of the same offence or crime. A woman who indulges in prostitution is called "akpara", but a male prostitute does not seem to have a name. A woman who commits adultery is also referred to as "akpara", but a man who commits the same offence is not called names. Does this mean that there is no concept of male prostitution in the Ibibio culture and language?

Another term that has a distasteful connotation is "ada", a name given to women who have no children. Incidentally, the term used interchangeably is ("ito") but it is very rarely used. It is more appropriate for destitute of sexual power. From personal communication it would appear that most Ibibio speakers of our generation are not familiar with the word.

We would like to note here also, the term "nwaan ofon-ofon" (meaning literally "woman cloth-cloth"). This term has no equivalent in English. "nwaan ofon-ofon" is a disdainful, contemptuous, spiteful and abusive term given to a woman who tries to excel and do things that are usually done by men. The Ibibio philosophy on womanhood behind this saying is that a woman does not know how to do anything except to wear clothes. In other words, a woman loves vanity and is most of the time preoccupied with what to put on.

**VOCABULARY USED BY MEN AND WOMEN :** In conversational interaction, men freely use certain address terms like "nne", "eka", "wonwaan", "ufan" etc., which are very endearing. On the contrary, women hardly use the masculine equivalent of terms when addressing men, except perhaps in older female vs. younger as taboo, especially names of some parts of the male and female reproductive organs.

## DISCUSSION

One wonders whether the differences in the use of the above terms constitute gender discrimination. In other words do these terms have a prejudice against women in favour of man? As a matter of fact, sex differences in language use is in the main, culture-based, and language being a socio-cultural phenomenon, obviously reflects socio-cultural structure. In the Ibibio culture as in most cultures women are seen as men's property, and the men as belonging to themselves and not accountable to the wives. A woman is seen as a man's property in the sense that she is either somebody's wife or daughter and this in a way provides societal protection for her. Where issues and differences have to be settled physically, the woman derives protection by relying on terms such as "anwaan owo", eyin owo" and making statements such as;



- A) Aanyemme iko do ndo anwaan owo (you are picking a quarrel with me (know that) I am somebody's wife).
- B) Aanyemme iko do ndo eyin owo. (you are picking a quarrel with me (know that I am somebody's daughter).

When dealing with males. This appears to be a positive aspect of male chauvinism.

The term "ebekpa" seems to derive from the cultural background of the people. In years gone by, the average Ibibio man was polygamous, so if he lost a wife, he was left with others and there was never really a widower, whereas a woman had one husband at a time, and if that one died, she was left with none, until such a time as she could remarry, if she ever remarried.

In most parts of Ibibioland, "ebekpa" evokes sympathy an image of someone who needs help and encouragement, while in other parts, it evokes hostility towards the woman. When a man dies, the woman is blamed for it, and could be dispossessed of all means of livelihood which the husband might have left. But, when a woman dies, the husband is not blamed for it, but is rather encouraged taking another wife almost immediately.

Furthermore, when a child is bad, he or she belongs to the mother, not the father, and is branded "eyin idiok eka" (a child of a bad mother). There is nothing like "eyin idiok ete" (a child of a bad father). Traditionally in Ibibio, a problem child is the mother's property while the good child belongs to the father.

Generally, in the language, a young man is described as akparawa" which etymologically, appears to come from the word "akpara". But, akparawa denotes youthfulness, prowess, and prestige. A man is proud to be called "akparawa", and there is the prestigious and famous "Mboho Mkparawa Ibibio," a socio-cultural organization whose membership is made of the cream of Ibibio young men.

The term "akparanwaan" is increasingly coming into use as parallel to "akparawa". "akparanwaan" is used to describe a lady, and it denotes youthfulness, beauty and charm. But, when "akpara" meaning prostitute is used, it is often ascribed to women only. This kind of unfriendly attitude towards women may have stemmed from an age-long Jewish tradition that had existed even before the days of Jesus Christ. Whereas it took two (a male and a female) to commit adultery; only the woman was "caught in the very" (Jn. 8:3 – 11).

Whenever anything goes wrong in the traditional Nigerian family the woman is held responsible for it. When there are no children in a marriage, it is the woman that is blamed. She is given the name "ada". As Motaze (2000) rightly puts it "ada" is an extremely distasteful name and no woman, beautiful or not would like to be branded with it (p.85).

A childless man is not given names, even though a man could be impotent and thus fail to produce children. It is not that traditional society is unaware of this



fact, but being a patriarchal society the male ego is always carefully protected. The wife would be discretely given out to another man for the purpose of procreation. Ifeoma Okeoye, in her novel **Behind the clouds** (1982) has given a good picture of this dilemma that women face.

Sociologists are of the view that the different paralinguistic systems which men and women possess often require women to show politeness in language use, due to subservience and deference (Trudgill, 1986; Wardhaugh, 1989).

Males are generally authoritative and think they can address women anyhow, whereas women are cautious, accommodating, refined and do not usually employ the profanities and obscenities men use. Because men feel superior and regard women as their subordinates, it is common for them to address women by such terms as "nne", "eka", "wonwaan", etc. even when they know the women's names. Similar terms are also commonly used in English (woman, lady, miss dear, babe, etc). In most communicative situations, most of these terms show affection, but a term like "wonwaan" could also denote disrespect or disdain, depending on the situation / context, it would be recalled that the Lord Jesus addressed women thus (cf. Jn. 2:4,8:10, 19:26). But this evoked concern, sympathy and forgiveness. However, the use of these terms depends on the social upbringing of the user. On the whole, women are more careful in speech because of their social role as females and caregivers.

## CONCLUSION

This paper draws attention to certain inequities in the use of language by men and women, with particular reference to certain terms used to describe both sexes in Ibibio. On the whole, the woman appears to be the most disfavoured. We are of the view that exploitation of the female sex in any way should not continue in this third millennium. In view of the fact that our era is witnessing unprecedented social changes, such that gender roles are changing our men's view of womanhood should be revisited and our manfolk should become conscious of their prejudices embedded in their respective languages and change their attitude towards females in a positive direction. The woman should be seen as the man's partner in progress, and should be given a chance to assert herself without being ridiculed. There are females who are great achievers. For some men, such is out of the ordinary.





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