

# Linguistic Reflections of Sexism in Everyday Spoken Discourse

Yemi Ogunsiji and Oluranti Adekemi Olajuyigbe

Department of English, Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo, Nigeria

doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/ejells.2013/vol13n319>

Published August 18, 2025

**Citation:** Ogunsiji Y. and Olajuyigbe O.A. (2025) Linguistic Reflections of Sexism in Everyday Spoken Discourse, *European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, 13 (3), 1-9

**Abstract:** *Language is an essential tool of human communication and human beings are imbued with an innate capacity to use language for communication. There are different personal variables that could be observed in the individual's use of language most especially in verbal communication. However, one of the potent observable indices in noting differences in human communication is the issue of gender. The concept of culture has been the most popularly recognized issue that can easily affect why, which and how language is used and as such, sex difference is an important factor. Allied with this is the concept of language and power. With an overview of many scholarly works, this work has located some differences observable in the language use of both male and female genders in different discourse patterns. Just as we have sex differences, there are also differences in the patterns of discourse of the sexes because we have been specially created on the bases of sex and gender. This work tries to examine the pattern of discourse between the two sexes with a view to locating the inherent differences in their use of language.*

**Keywords:** language, discourse, sex/sexism, gender, power.

## INTRODUCTION

Human beings are imbued with different inherent patterns and dispositions. The way we use language is one of those variables that can be easily identified among the homo sapiens. Human beings have been created in different ways with different constructs and manipulative instincts. Our creation as male and females has a lot of implications because gender or sex and the linguistic differences especially in spoken discourse will make reference to the varying ways in which individuals use language based on their sexual identity, socialization, and cultural norms. When God created heaven and earth, He said, "Let us create man in our image, our likeness and let them rule over all the earth..." (Genesis 1:26). This biblical observation has shown the concept of "man" as paramount. No wonder, man is always put in the forefront as the head in virtually all their undertakings. Apart from this biblical assertion, in many cultures, "man" seems to be given the

utmost priority in terms of the existence of homo sapiens, hence, power and other essential things in the world.

In the present situation, the feminist assumption seems to have been more critical of the contemporary society as it relates to gender differentiation and its concomitants. Quite a good number of female scholars have seen the interest of women as being subordinated to those of men. To them, women capacities had been underrated; their desire for autonomy had been frustrated and their sexuality at one time or the other had been either denied or exploited. Because of these observations, in the literary world, women had been contesting the said trivialization and sentimentalisation of their image. There are good reasons to believe that the biological sex which identified human beings as male/female, could be distinguished from social gender i.e. identification as feminine or masculine since the latter is not an automatic consequence of the formal one (Oakly 1972; Archer & Lloyd, 1982; Halliday 2007; Odebunmi & Okunola, 2018). However, when it comes to the use of language, there are definitely some differences which mark out the sex differentiation although such differences are not markers of subordination. In some cultures, there are some words which women cannot use (Stork & Widdowson, 1981). Apart from cultural influence, women tend to be more refined in their language use. The differences noticed in the speeches of the two sexes in this paper are purely linguistic observations.

Sex or the concept of sexism and linguistic differences are deeply intertwined because it reflects a sort of inequalities between men and women. Language plays a significant role in perpetuating sexism, often subtly, through various mechanisms. As a vehicle of representations, language highlights, accentuate or even blur intergroup boundaries. When we use Social Identity Theory, Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reiches, and Wetherell (1987), are more specific by using Self-Categorisation Theory. They observe that gender strongly contributes to the salience or accessibility of the social category. The dual use of grammatical format in the masculine forms to refer to people in general (as generic forms) as well as man in particular (as generic-specific forms) has been a reflection of inter-group hierarchies. This helps to delimit inter-group boundaries in a way that tends to disadvantage a particular gender,

Looking more critically into the use of language, especially by different sexes; what we call linguistic sexism manifests in different forms in some uses like (a) Generic masculine terms where masculine pronouns and nouns are used as defaults for both men and women, This has a kind of interpretation or meanings that are not palatable for the females. (b) Gender stereotyping where language often reflects and reinforces gender stereotypes. Men are associated with strength, bravery while women are associated with fear, weakness and so forth. (c) Linguistic abstraction has to do with the use of language to represent women in a less favourable way, often subtly, through choices of words/phrases or clauses that affect attributions and reinforce stereotypical beliefs.

It is imperative for language scholars to note that sexism and linguistic differences are complex issues and they are deeply embedded in societal structures and language. When language is used,

especially at a spoken or an informal level, there are bound to note or observe some differences. A good number of the differences can be linked with the speaker's sex or gender.

### **Language, Gender and Power**

Kress (1989) observes that control of social occasions, especially that of the genre of the text, is a sign of power. He exemplifies this through a text collected in one of his research works. The text collected is a spoken discourse between an interviewer and interviewees. He observes that it remains to be explained why the woman interviewee values her knowledge less highly, why her language showed so many more signs of tentativeness than that of the male interviewee. In his study, he suggests that the man constructs the woman interviewee within sexist discourse. He adds that she allows herself to be constructed like that for the duration of the interview or perhaps that she had permanently adopted the subject position of "elderly woman" as constructed in sexist discourse (p.56). There is, in her discourse, the use of tag and modal auxiliaries of hypothetical possibility. Men, in their discourse, according to Kress's study, adopt the subject position constructed for them in sexist discourse. These include the assertive, confident and blunt discourse.

The genre of the discourse used here is seen as a sign of power even though the power may be challenged. The woman interviewee acquiesces totally in the interviewer's control. What all these boil down to is that the use of language by both sexes could determine where the power and authority lies. It is assumed that language use by women is not as blunt or assertive as that of men, hence the concept of power can be identified here.

Apart from spoken discourse, written discourse is not be left out. Martin (1989) identifies some differences in the writings done by boys and girls. The differences have to do with what is written as well as the genre chosen. Girls usually write about family, dress, pets, appearances, romance, fantasy, world inhabited by fairies, witches and characters from the stories they read. On the other hand, boys write about zoo, radio, sports, trains, planes, war, adventures, science, monster stories, crime and a lot of others (White, 1986). One can here ask the kind of culture that promotes sex differences in writing and speech. Martin (1989) suggests at least five distinct factors appearing to contribute to such differences. These are (i) boys are irreverent/girls conform, (ii) boys watch TV/girls read, (iii) boys love adventure/girls play in the house, (iv) boys explore the nature/girls explore the nurture of things, and (v) boys perform in public/girls seek quiet praise. These factors could be arbitrary but from the point of view of Martin, the important thing to note is that boys are more interested in information and factual writing than girls. Girls are being encouraged in their narrative writings and they are being "depowered" right from the first stage of literacy. Right from infancy, the primary school boys are being unconsciously turned towards the kind of writing that are powerful in one's culture. So, it will be discovered that language use varies according to sex and this difference is inherent and culture related. The difference starts right from infancy and as growth progresses, the differences become more pronounced.

**Sex and Some Linguistic Differences:** Poynton (1989) has done quite some work on language and gender and her work will serve as a good input in the present paper. Also, Phillips

(1980); Birdwhistel (1970), Goffman 1976) and Ogunsiji (2020) have provided series of insights on language as well as gender. The differences to be noted in this paper are those that are in line with gender role (a social role guided by gender). This is because this paper is limited to the areas of linguistic system in relation to gender. Other gender issues like gender identity which will go beyond the purview of linguistics will not be touched.

It has to be noted that there seem to be linguistic features stereotypically associated with individual sex. Such features could be associated with the appropriate gender group from time to time (Edelsky, 1977). Poynton has endeavoured to present a fairly comprehensive list of language use that could be currently known between male and female sex and this has provided an insight for this paper. The areas that are basically looked into in this work are three: discourse, lexico-grammar, and phonology.

Bodine (1975), Broker (1980), Haas (1979) and Kramer et al (1978) have provided a good survey of the use of language as it affects gender issue in different cultures. So as not to lose the focus of this study, let us begin by looking into the linguistic features that can be observed as marking some differences in the speeches of both male and female sexes. Although differences can vary in many cultures, the study here is a generalization of the two sexes. A particular culture or ethnic group is not focused but the series of findings seems adequate for our observations.

### **Discourse Features**

Discourses present modes of talking about the world from the point of view of a good institution. Some features such as the following are of note in the study of discourse of this nature.

- (a) **Interruption:** In speech, men interrupt women often and not in the other way round. It is even not vice-versa in a conversation including both sexes. However, perhaps in some formal settings like in the interview or any other formal discourses, this might happen but not too often.
- (b) **Switching pause:** Poynton's (1989) studies have shown that white males have a longer pause than their females after their turn. This observation is noticeable in mixed-sex conversation. However, using the U.S. data among the blacks, the females have a longer pause than their male speakers.
- (c) **Topic choice:** Often, men do reject a woman's topic choices in mixed-sex conversation. Women will however talk on topics raised by men; they cannot reject their topics.
- (d) **Back channel noises:** Noises like mm, hmm, eerh, etc. are significantly used by women more than men especially in woman-to-woman conversations. The communication channel can be reopened with linguistic items like: "I see", "Yeah", "O.K." and so on.
- (e) **Speech function:** Part of this is the use of speech act to command. More commands are being used by men than women. Again, men usually have the imperative mood when such a command is used. However, when women use commands, they do not normally use it alongside with the imperative interrogative or declarative clause e. g. "Would you mind leaving that place?" This interrogative sentence can be changed to declarative type thus, "I wonder if you will be kind enough to leave that place". It will be discovered that politeness principle is taken into consideration in these choices by women.

- (f) **Initiating conversation:** Brown and Levison (1979), on the principle of politeness phenomenon in line with Poynton (1989), observed that women try to initiate conversation more often than men but they succeed less often. This is because males do not often obey politeness or cooperative principles in such situations.

### **Lexico-Grammatical Stratum: Grammar**

**Clause Rank:** At the level of clause, the following are noted:

- (a) **Tags:** It had been claimed by Lakoff (1975) that women use more tags than men. She however adds that this finding is as a result of different laboratory studies done. Observational studies have found either no difference or that men use them more than women.
- (b) **Modality:** This is the variety of means by which one can say something either categorically or not. There are modal verbs like will/would, can/could, may/might, must, ought, etc., modal adverbs like probably, possibly, certainly and interpersonal metaphors like "I think", "I suppose", etc. The discovery is that women are generally supposed to use more of modality than men. This is a part of the stereotype of tentativeness associated with women's speech. Super-polite forms i.e. multiple modality are said to be in use more by women. Example of such multiple use of modality to show super-politeness is this: "I was wondering if you could possibly just do me a favour if you wouldn't mind". This is a type of example provided by Poynton. And it is observed that men would hardly use this type of expression.
- (c) **Sentence length:** Here, evidence is limited as to who produces longer sentences between male and female. Assumption however, is that girls produce longer sentences than boys. However, in adulthood the reverse may be the case as Haas (1979) has observed.
- (d) **Sentence completeness:** Haas (1979) has made reference to Jespersen (1922) in this regard. Jespersen was of the view that women left sentences incomplete more often than men. Haas tries to defend this observation by suggesting that this may be because of the fact that women get interrupted more often than men.
- (e) **Direct quotation:** The assumption is that women are supposed to use direct quotation rather than paraphrase more than men. In their indication of powerless language, O' Barr and Alkin (1980) include this issue of direct quotation or paraphrase. However, because of the rules regarding hearsay evidence, as in law court, not many instances were collected in their data.

### **Group Rank**

- (a) **Adjective frequency and types:** It has been observed that girls use more adjectives than boys in both speech and writing. Again, it has been discovered that women use more evaluative adjectives which show attitude whereas men do not use as many as women. Examples of such adjectives include: wonderful, darling, gorgeous, etc. This use may be as a result of the pervasive stereotype of women functioning in terms of feeling or emotion rather than rationality.
- (b) **Intensifiers i.e. sub-modification:** like so, very etc., are said to be in use more by men rather than women.
- (c) **Possessive construction:** In one of the studies of Haas (1979), girls use this word form more than boys. However, no details are provided as to the kind of possessive being referred to.
- (d) **Reduplicated forms:** Key (1975) has found that more reduplicated adjectival forms are used extensively by women. He cites examples like "itsy-bitsy", "teery-tiny". Reduplicated items that



relate to pet form such as "Ally -Bally", "stevie- weare", are also said to be in use by more women than men among the whites. This may be seen by many people as a part of baby- talk. Hence, its use is more appropriate for women rather than for men.

### **Lexico – Grammatical Stratum: Lexis**

- (a) **Field range:** Both men and women make use of different lexical items in their repertoire depending on the range and kind of field they are involved in. However, Lakoff (1975), in showing the examples of colour, suggests that women have a more differentiated command of this than men.
- (b) **Slangs:** Here, men are generally supposed to use more slangs than women. This is generally interpreted as indicative of men's greater bonding or solidarity between males than between females in English speaking societies. Again, the use of slang often occurs in relaxed speech. This might be because females have not got enough access to such relaxed conversation between fellow females.
- (c) **Swearing:** This is given almost entirely to men.
- (d) **Euphemism:** Poynton (1989) says that this is very common in women more so that women have a consistent reputation for being less prepared to call a spade a spade than men especially with reference to sexual matters and bodily functions.
- (e) **Politeness:** Markers like 'thanks', "please" are said to be in use more by women than men. This is because, women are observed to be more polite than men.

### **Phonological Stratum**

In situations where there are variations in pronunciation, women tend to use the form that has higher prestige than men. Women are not always conservative as far as knowledge use is concerned. Again, they can be in the vanguard of linguistic change (Mitchell & Delbrige, 1965). The most recent picture is even more complex, seeing woman as having a wider spread of variation than men (Kroch, 1978; Horvath, 1985). Concerning intonation, McCannell-Ginet (1978) is of the view that women's intonational use is more dynamic than that of men. He adds that they display wider ranges of pitch, more frequent and rapid shift in pitch, and more frequently ending with a non-falling terminal than men(p.555).

### **CONCLUSION**

Based on the series of observations in the texts reviewed, in term of *speech patterns*, women tends to use more cooperative principles like tag questions and hedging; emotional language like emotive vocabulary; and relational language like building rapport and showing empathy. Men, on the other hand, tend to use more assertive language like direct statements and interruption; dominative language like controlling conversations and the use of jargon.

In term of conversational style, women often engage in collaborative conversation like active listening and shared talk; emotive support and empathy is also reflected in the discourse of women. Men often engage in competitive conversation, information exchanges and problem-solving.

From the above, at the level of discourse, the roles of exchange structure and speech function are either assigned to males or females – or abrogated by males through interrupting females to take over the role of primary knower. Males use command often and this is realised through imperative mood. This is contrasted with the female use of command which can be realized by modalised interrogative or declarative. This is significant and it says a great deal about institutionalized power and gender.

In terms of lexico-semantic features, the main system implicated is mood in terms of actual choices, tags and modality. Participants' role can be seen depending on the experiential version of actual conversational role.

Finally, we discover that an overall pattern in the system that is sensitive to gender is clearly discernible. This is the fact that the primary systems implicated are those that realise inter-personal meaning as well as experiential meaning of different kinds. Careful and constant observation will show that there are some differences in the speech of both men and women. By implication, we can submit that in terms of gender and language use, the males seem to have the controlling code while the females have the responding code. By this, most women see this as domineering and chauvinistic.

Because language is basically functional, it is the pivot of the communicative process of the human species, there is therefore the need to have a cooperative attitude by both sexes. The differences noted in the language use of both male and female gender cannot be obliterated. Language use can reflect and reinforce social power structure, socialization and identity. The differences highlighted are the general trends and not absolute and universal. Individual variation is significant, and many people may not conform to these patterns. Language use is also context-dependent and influenced by multiple factors. By recognising these differences, we can better understand and appreciate the complexities of human communication and language differentiates.

## REFERENCES

- Archel & Lloyd, B. (1982): *Sex and Gender*. Penguin.
- Birdwhistell, R. (1970): *Kinesic and Context: Essay on Body Motion Communication*. Penguin.
- Bordine, A. (1975a): "Sex differentiation in Language": Thorne and Henley (eds) *Language and Sex: Differences and Dominance*. Mass: Newbury House.
- Borker, R. (1980): "Anthropology: Social, Cultural perspectives" McConnel-Ginet Borker& Furman (eds) *Woman and Language and Literature Society*, N.Y. Praeger.
- Brown p & Levinson, S. (1978): "Universals in Language Usage: Politeness phenomena". Goody.EN. (ed) *Questions and Politeness: Studies in Social Interaction*. Cambridge: C.U.P.
- Edelsky, C. (1972): "Acquisition of an aspect of Communicative Competence: Learning what it means to talk like a lady". Ervin – Tripp & Mitchell-Kerman (eds) *Child Discourse*. NY: Academic Press.

- Gofman, E. (1976): *Gender Advertisement*. N.Y.: Harper and Row.
- Haas, A. (1979): "Male and Female Language Spoken differences: Stereotypes and Evidence" in *Psychological Bulletin*, 86 (3)
- Horvath, B.M. (1985): *Variations in Australian English" The Sociolect of Sydney*. Cambridge:CUP.
- Jespersen, O. (1922): *Language, its Nature, Development and Origin*. London: Allen and Urwin.
- Key M. R. (1975): *Male/Female Language*. N.Y.: Scarecrow Press.
- Kramer, C.; Thorne, B. & Henley, N. (1978): "Review Essay Perspectives on Language and Communication Signs". *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 3.
- Kress, G. (1989): *Linguistic Process in Sociocultural Perspectives*. Oxford: O.U.P.
- T AS. (1978): "Towards a Theory of Social Dialect Variation". *Language in Society*, 7.
- Lakoff, R. (1975): *Language and Women Place*. N.Y, Harper and Row.
- Martin, J.R. (1989): *Factual Writing: Exploring and Challenging Social Reality*. Oxford: O.U.P.
- McConnell-Ginet, S. (1978): "Address Forms in Sexual Politics". D. Butturff & EC. Epstein (eds) *Women's Language and Style*. Akron: University of Akron Press.
- Mitchell, A. G. & Delbridge, A. (1965): *A Speech of Australian Adolescents*. Sidney: Angus & Rabertson.
- O' Barr, W.M. & Alkins, B.K. (1980): "Women Language" or "Powerless Language"? McConnell-Ginet et al (eds) *Women and Language and Literary Society*. N.Y.: Praeger.
- Oakley, A. (1972): *Sex, Gender and Society*. Melbourne: Sun Books.
- Ogunsiji, Y. (2020). 'Language and Gender: an Overview', Yemi Ogunsiji, Clinton Adebisi, Adekemi Olajuyigbe (eds) *Interrogating Gender Through Third World Dialectics: A Multidisciplinary Approach*. (A Festschrift in Honour of Dr Mrs Y.O.O. Akorede. Texas: The Feminist Womanist Theorist Grand Prairie.
- Olaiya, T. (2018). 'Language and Power Relations in Billboard Advertisement of Drinks in Ibadan Metropolis', Ayo Osisanwo, Ibrahim Olosun & Idowu Odebunmi (eds) *Discourse-Stylistics, Sociolinguistics in our Society (A Festschrift for Ayo Ogunsiji)*, Ibadan: Sterling Horden Publishers, 507-530.
- Philips, S.U. (1980): Sex Differences and Language". *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 9.
- Poynton, C. (1989): *Language and Gender: Making the Difference*. Oxford: O.U.P.
- Roberts, B. (1984): "Ockers and Malespeak: why men and women don't speak the same language in Australia"? *Australian Society*, 3 (8)
- Stork, F.C. & Widdowson, J.D.A. (1981): *Learning about Linguistics*. London: Hutchison Group.
- White, J. (1986): "The writing on the wall: beginning or an end of a girl carrier?" *Woman Studies International Forum*, 9(5).
- Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell (1987): *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorisation Theort*. Basil: Blackwell,



### **A SHORT BIO-DATA**

**Yemi Ogunsiji** is a Lecturer, a professor of English Language at Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo, Nigeria. He specializes in Sociolinguistics, Stylistics and Pragmatics. His research interests are Sociolinguistics, Applied Linguistics and Discourse Studies. He is very well published in reputable journals within and outside Nigeria.