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## **Language And Gender Interaction In Bakossi Proverbial Discourse**

Language can be seen as a systematic means which human beings use in the communication of thoughts, ideas, values, norms and feelings. As a pervasive aspect of our lives, it is a verbal means with which we communicate and conduct social interaction. This paper examines specific aspects of proverbial language of the Bakossi people of the South West Region of Cameroon and determines through a feminist analysis how this language use illustrates in-built sexist connotation in the sense that it generally indicates positive things for males while negative connotations are assumed for women. Proverbs, pronominal forms and idiomatic expressions are collected and analysed to ascertain the above argument. The evidence in this paper serves as a reference point for women of sexism that is built into language use in these old pithy sayings which are meant to encapsulate pearls of wisdom.

*Keywords:* Language use, gender, sexist, sexism, Bakossi, proverbs, discourse.

### **1. Introduction**

Language is the most important communication tool for human beings. It not only reflects the reality of the society, but also has various functions to strengthen and maintain social existence. As a result, language does mirror the gendered perspectives and can also impact and contribute to changing people's perception of gender over time. Thus, for a long time, feminists, sociolinguists as well as folklorists have shown interest in describing the differences in language use between women and men, and studies of the cultural roles ascribed to gender. However, interest in language usage differences between the two sexes has a very long tradition in attempting to explain the distinction between language and gender and how language supports, enforces, and maintains attitudes about gender in general and women in particular. It is against this background that we intend to look at how Akoose proverbial language is used in the Bakossi society of Cameroon to reflect the interaction between women and men and the overall impact this can have on the patterns of development for men and women.

Some feminists have argued that language is sexist in the sense that language generally indicates positive things for males while negative connotations are assumed for females. In the English language, for instance, the generic pronoun for human is 'man',

woman inclusive; God is male; professions and important positions have primarily male nomenclature; men are also associated with powerful symbols such as 'lion', 'tiger', etc. On the other hand, women in the same language are referred to with words such as 'baby', 'honey', 'sugar', 'chick', etc. Pearson (1985) shows that in a study in which people were asked to list all terms for women and men, the terms for women were longer but with connotations that are more negative. The English language is not alone in being sexist. Almost all languages the world over can be said to be guilty of this 'oversight' or 'crime'.

Various studies have been carried out to show that language can be used as a means of exclusion and participation based on certain criteria. In many instances, the bases for making such judgements are rather arbitrary. According to Bamgbose (1998:8), "race, gender, colour, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, age, social class, religion, caste, occupation and language" are some of the indices used for either participation or exclusion. Our concern in this paper will be to find out how language has been used and can be used for excluding women from participating in decision making and even matters that are of direct concern to them.

What then is language? Language can be defined from various perspectives. It is the verbal means with which human beings communicate and conduct social interaction. From the linguist viewpoint, it is the subject matter of his/her discipline, which he/she attempts to battle with in order to wrest some form of insight, through a plethora of theories. Language can be seen as a systematic means, which human beings use in the communication of thoughts, ideas, feelings, etc., through the use of conventionally accepted symbols, which maybe verbal, written or even through gestures. This paper examines specific aspects of proverbial language of the Bakossi people of the South West Region of Cameroon and determines through a feminist analysis how this language use illustrates in-built sexist connotation in the sense that it generally indicates positive things for males while negative connotations are assumed for women. Proverbs, pronominal forms and idiomatic expressions are collected and analysed to ascertain the above argument.

## **2. Brief overview of language and gender research**

Since the 1960s, sociolinguists (e.g., Cameron, 1995; Eckert, 1989; Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999; Labov, 1994; 2001; Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 1990; Trudgill, 1975; Zimmerman & West, ) have been exploring the gendered dimension of language. These early works have assisted in distinguishing different aspects of sex and gender. Although many sociolinguistic researchers use gender and sex interchangeably, it is very critical to understand that sex refers to biological features such as XX chromosomes for females and XY chromosomes for males. Some studies claim that the assumptions associated with characteristics for male as masculinity, or likewise characteristics for females as femininity, are inaccurate. Such a biological view on sexual character leads to reification (making real/concrete) of male and female inequality in our society. This interpretation

results in numerous sociobiological claims relative to neurological factors about the relationship of male and female speech behaviour.

On the contrary, gender refers to cultural and social attributes that have been acquired via the socialization process. It is up to individuals to choose characteristics that they deem suitable for males and females and employ them accordingly. According to Wardhaugh (2010:334), “gender is also a fact that we cannot avoid; it is part of the way in which societies are formed around us”. Therefore, Cameron (2007), Coates (1986), Crawford (1995), Eckert (1989), Tannen (1990), Holmes & Meyerhoff (1999), and other scholars have considered gender as a social construct in the study of language and gender and social sciences. Gender division is a fundamental aspect of society, as it is deeply imbedded in social organization and taught to individuals from early childhood to adulthood stages. However, numerous studies argue that gender categories have changed throughout history and varied depending on specific race, ethnicity, culture, religion, nationality, region, and class (Labov, 1994, 2001; Lakoff, 1975, and Wardhaugh, 2010). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003:50) claim that “The force of gender categories in society makes it impossible for us to move through our lives in a non-gendered way and impossible not to behave in a way that brings out gendered behaviour in others”.

### **3. Methodology**

This study involves both secondary and primary data. The researcher obtained secondary data from the review of documents both published and unpublished sources. These included monographs, journal articles, manuscripts, books and dissertations that deal with Bakossi proverbs especially those related to women as used by Bakossi men. For primary data, the researcher did field work, conducted oral interviews, questioned some of the best minds of Bakossi culture, and recorded, collected, transcribed and translated the proverbs and idiomatic expressions under study in life and simulated performances in selected Bakossi villages in Cameroon.

### **4. Theoretical orientation**

The present study utilizes insights from the feminist theories of Julia Kristeva (1981, 1983), Lucy Irigaray (1985, 1992), Helen Cixous (1994), Dale Spender (1992), Annie Leclerc (1992) and Debora Cameron (1995). The above feminist scholars, in sum, have argued that language has been a site for sexual politics played by the male to female disadvantage. Irigaray (1992: 80), for instance, in ‘Women in Exile’, argued that language is not ‘neutral with regards to difference between sexes’ but has been masculinized. Thus meanings that are constructed in the masculine order are only such that would sustain and perpetuate the patriarchal system, and need to be interrogated. In addition, the Power and dominance approach will also be used in the analyses of this paper. Proponents of this approach include: Spender, 1985; Zimmerman & West, 1975;

Coates, 1986; and O'Barr & Bowman, 1980. This approach sees women as an oppressed group and interprets linguistic differences in women's and men's language in terms of men's dominance and women's subordination. Researchers using this model are concerned to show how male dominance is enacted through linguistic practice. 'Doing power' is often a way of 'doing gender' too (see West and Zimmerman 1983). Moreover, all participants in discourse, women as well as men, collude in sustaining and perpetuating male dominance and female oppression.

## **5. Brief presentation of Bakossi**

The Bakossi ethnic group is found in Kupe Muanenguba Division of the South West Region of Cameroon. The 2007 census puts the population at about 200,000 inhabitants. The Bakossi tribe, therefore, is one of the largest in the South West Region. Akoose is the main language spoken by the Bakossi people with differences in the accents depending on the geographical location. Like many African languages, Akoose is a tonal language. It is classified among the big Bantu language group termed the Northern Bantu Languages. Traditionally, Bakossi women have, from time immemorial, been held in second-class status to men. The social structures are centered on men, leaving women powerless. In spite of the recognition of the equality of men and women, the modern Bakossi society is predominantly patriarchal. For example, at first, women were not allowed to own or inherit properties from their parents. They were not also allowed to speak where men were gathered to discuss issues affecting the community.

## **6. Bakossi Proverbs and Idiomatic Expressions**

Many attempts have been made to define proverbs. It is not our intention in this paper to add to the polemics over the difficulty of finding an acceptable definition of the term. For the purposes of this paper, therefore, we shall simply define proverbs as "popular sayings in relatively fixed forms which are in oral circulation and which are marked by their brevity" (Tala 1999:138). In understanding difficult situations, Africans turn to proverbs for answers. "They are creatively employed to speed up communication, convey weighty messages and sharpen arguments" (Sone 2012:151). Thus, proverbs are fundamental ingredients in the intellectual tradition of the Bakossi people. They stem from everyday activities and embrace the philosophical and socio-cultural value systems of the people. This explains why William Bascom asserts that 'the fact that the proverbs express moral and value judgments, indicating what is right or wrong and what is good or bad gives them an important place in African ethical teachings' (Bascom 1993:99). They are equally used for blunt criticisms and clarification of difficult ideas. African proverbs, therefore, constitute the most profound linguistic feature that encapsulates aphorisms, most of which are founded on either the experiences of people or their observations about happenings in this life or even the spiritual world.

The proverbs in the annexure below provide important insight to social interaction among the Bakossi. Specifically, we will address the issue of the use of proverbs and idiomatic expressions as indices to gender interaction.

## 7. Deductions and Analyses

The above proverbs and idiomatic expressions in Akoose language are an insight of the world view of the Bakossi people of Cameroon with regard to the social interaction between men and women. In some Bakossi proverbs, women are extremely valuable in the sight of the society. Not only do they bear life, they nurse, cherish, give warmth and care for life, since all human life passes through their own bodies. The following proverbs bring these points clearly: *Ke mod boh wieh e-ndinga jah, boh pehlede bebad* “even the closest of friends can never share their wives.” This indicates that a wife is so valuable that she cannot be given over to even the best friends of her husband. For that reason, another proverb states that: *boh wuweh m'mwad a nsum* “a woman must not be killed during war”. She is the mother of life, and to kill the woman is to kill children, to kill humanity itself. The woman should be handled with respect and not to be treated as if she were a slave. Even an aged woman among the Bakossi people, is a blessing to men. This is illustrated by the proverb *e-bonka moh a wong njin ne m'mwad ngane ewonge m'mwad* “it is better to be married to an old woman than to remain unmarried.” This presupposes that there are areas of human life which only the woman can fulfil. Among the Bakossi, a man cannot be considered successful as long as he lacks a wife. The mother or wife is probably the most important member of the family, the centre of familihood. That is why the Bakossi people say: *mod awe e-nyaabeh, a huntane nan a 'ndited nyaa moh m'boh nwam bwam* “a man who has not travelled thinks that his mother is the best cook in the world”. This proverb, while attacking a narrow horizon in life, shows how central a mother is. This sentiment is reinforced in the proverb: *mwan awe bangeh abii nyaa e kudeh abii mbeeb* -“a child that refuses its mother’s breast can never be full.” Other people may feed the baby or the person, but their food will never satisfy as well as that provided by the mother.

Obviously, from the analyses of the above proverbs, Bakossi men held their women in high esteem. It seems, however that such concern and respect was promoted for the overall interest of men. According to Akpabot (1981: 90), the Bakossi society, like any other African society,

...was a man’s society, created by men for the men and dominated almost entirely by male interests. Women were seen mostly as necessary appendages with clearly defined and circumscribed roles which were calculated to advance the pervasive interest of the male.

To merit protection, respect and care from the men, women were expected to present a certain behaviour pattern in keeping with what is expected of them by men and the

society in general. It was a give and take situation with clearly defined roles both for the man and the woman. In the old Bakossi society, the primary role of a mother was to bear, and rear children. Emade (2005:20) confirms that, in the old Bakossi,

women were expected to be faithful as wives, fruitful as mothers, good as cooks, and industrious in crafts, farming and other womanly occupations. In many cases, women were the real day- to-day bread winners of the family.

This was, of course, applicable to all women and not just the mothers. They were expected to be subordinate to men. This is reflected in the following proverbs: *mwenjum e wonghe ndab nze m'mwad a deh a ndab boh a kabeh nyaah* "I (man) cannot have a house where a woman will undertake the task of sharing meat." At a deeper level, it implies that a man is the one who plays the dominant role and takes important decisions concerning the home and not the woman; she should be subordinate to the man. Another example is: *nzom eje m'mwad awe awi njum a wanleh mod alum ede ne poh* "A debtor's wife says the same thing as her husband." This implies that the husband dictates what the wife must say and do; she is not expected to act independently.

The traditional Bakossi woman is expected to be submissive to her husband, father and other males. She is not expected to argue with them, show any excessive anger, physically assault them or attempt to get into areas traditionally considered male preserves. Thus the proverb: *ekog m'mwad jeh suwoh, deg m'mwad e suwoh ate* "It is a woman's vagina that is supposed to be red and not her eyes." This suggests that a woman should have all the feminine attributes, which ought to be subdued and secret. Therefore, her 'redness' should be a very private matter because her vagina, which is red, is in a very private place. Only men should be red in the eyes; certainly not the Bakossi female. The human eyes are located in a very strategic position for anyone to see but a woman's vagina is indeed very private and is not as obviously located as the eyes. 'Redness' suggests boldness, fierceness, hot-tempered, etc., which definitely falls outside the clearly well-defined province of the Bakossi woman. This seems to explain why the Bakossi man feels threatened when women nowadays perform 'masculine' feats into professions that are expected to be the preserve of the men.

Having looked at the issue of gender and language interaction in the Akoose (also with a cursory survey in English), some conclusions can be drawn from the analyses. The first obvious deduction is that because of the Bakossi worldview that the man be dominant and aggressive, and the woman submissive, gentle, and caring, women in Bakossi society appear to be comfortable to take a laid back position. She seems to internalise the idea that she should be seen and not be heard. Attempts by women to take on more dominant and visible roles among the Bakossi people are severely frowned at, not only by the men, but also, and even more sharply, by the womenfolk themselves. This raises the question: Is woman not woman's worst enemy? Another stereotype about women that comes out of the analyses is that women are frivolous, flippant, and not to be trusted with serious matters. Bakossi men seem to regard women as inconsequential.

We are now in the new millennium, are today's Bakossi women comfortable with this picture portrayal? If they are not, what then is the way forward? When can they begin to prove that they can hold their own in the different spheres amongst male colleagues? They should not depend solely on men for everything. Women have traditionally recognised the disadvantages of depending solely and wholly on men. Bakossi make derogatory expressions for women whose only source of hope for survival is their husbands. It is very common to hear expressions as: *nze njum awede ne m'mwad moh wedeh* "if the husband dies, the woman also dies." This means that a woman will find it extremely difficult to cope on her own without the husband's support. Women should, therefore, pull themselves up and work even harder to merit more respect from men. After all, there is also a Bakossi proverb which states that *m'mwad awe jame mbeeh bwam moh boh bah mochel bah a jaah* "a woman who is a good cook is the one saddled with the responsibility of cooking the hare." It is believed among the Bakossi people that the hare is a difficulty and trying Venison to deal with in the culinary sense. This researcher calls on Bakossi women to take such responsibilities, not only in the domestic fields, but elsewhere in the educational, business, political and international arena.

## 8. Conclusion

From the above discussion, it can be observed that both males and females play a crucial role in the socio-economic life of the Bakossi community. However, despite the crucial role that women play, they are devalued owing to ingrained societal attitudes and beliefs regarding them and because the Bakossi community is patriarchal. Personally, we do not agree with the widespread indifference to problems concerning language and gender among the Bakossi. Nowadays, sexism is a political issue. It affects the language we choose to use. Many people speaking or writing any language today wish to avoid using language which supports unfair or untrue attitudes to a particular sex, especially women. Among the Bakossi, sexist language is the outcome of implied ideological beliefs in gender stereotypes. The sexist linguistic aspects that are encoded within Bakossi proverbial discourse are mainly from the encoding of reality from a male point of view. In other words, this type of language can only help to reinforce the idea of male superiority and female inferiority. It suggests an inherent male dominance and superiority in many fields of life. Thus, the Bakossi proverbial language, as presented in this paper, shows the superiority of male on female. In fact, the superiority of one gender on the other is linguistically expressed through attributing certain linguistic units to either males or females. The paper also reveals that the sense of inequality, as shown in Bakossi proverbs, is perpetuated in the ideas of masculine power practiced on females.

## 9. Recommendations

The stereotypes and evidence discussed in this paper have significant implications for the power structure between the sexes and the psyche of both men and women in Bakossi society. The paper recommends that Bakossi women should quietly but firmly resist any attempt by anyone to put them down. To this, women must believe in themselves; they must have a lot of self-confidence to prove their mettle. The situation of women in Bakossi society, I suspect, will not be much different from other parts of Cameroon and Africa as a whole. Therefore, we hope that the discussion here will be useful and relevant to women in many parts of Africa and will stimulate similar studies in order to arrive at useful generalizations for the way forward for the woman in Africa. This research may trigger an interest in evaluating our understanding of the Bakossi culture, especially gender differences in language. As a result, socio-linguist and gender specialists alike will thereby increase their understanding of this important dimension of human communication.

## 10. Annexure: Language data

1. *ekog m'mwad jeh suwoh ati, deg m'mwad e suwoh ate*

It is a woman's vagina that is supposed to be red and not her eyes

**Meaning:** Women should be submissive not aggressive.

2. *mwan e kobeh mbin eje saah boh a jughe mepii o-me nyaah.*

A child cannot play with the balls (testicles) of the father but he/she can play with the balls (breast) in the mother's chest.

**Meaning:** Women can be treated with levity.

3. *nzom eje m'mwad awe awi njum a wanleh mod alum ede ne poh.*

A debtor's wife says the same thing as her husband.

**Meaning:** Women are subordinate to their husbands.

4. *m'mwad a bi neh etum ne a chan mboteh*

The only thing a woman is interested in is acquiring clothes and being fashion conscious.

**Meaning:** Women are frivolous and not serious.

5. *m'mwad ngen?*  
A mere woman

**Meaning:** A woman is not to be considered for serious matters.

6. *nze mwan a bibeh abeh boh hob bah a kube nyaaa, boh nze a booh abe boh hob ba a kube saah.*  
When a child's behaviour is bad h/she is called after the mother, but when the behaviour is good h/she is called after the father.

**Meaning:** Women are associated with negative traits, while men are often associated with images.

7. *mod awe wooh m'mwad awe booh bwam bwam a senghe ne kwed.*  
A man who marries a beautiful wife is a debtor to death.

**Meaning:** Women are associated with or sources of conflict and trouble.

8. *ayiol-e m'mwad e wintane a moh dide chum anid-e boh e wonghe nzib*  
Because women never admit they have eaten is the reason why they do not grow beards.  
**Meaning:** Women are liars; they don't admit to anything.

9. *mwenjum e wonghe ndab nze m'mwad a deh a ndab boh a kabeh nyaah*  
I (man) cannot have a house where a woman will undertake the task of sharing meat.

**Meaning:** Domination of woman by men/subordination of women to men.

10. *mwan m'mwad a kug chum eje hede a susu kub*  
A young girl will certainly find what she is looking for in the buttocks of a chicken.

**Meaning:** A women should know her limits/place in society. (Women are not expected to eat this part of the chicken; only men do).

11. *m'mwad awe booh a nanged eh bonghe a deng bwam bwam*  
A woman who is good in bed should not be loved to death

**Meaning:** There is no need to take advantage of a good/beautiful woman.

12. *nze ewooh m'mwad ebiped mbia, behn boh tum we*

If a man marries from the wrong family, his mates will achieve more than him.

**Meaning:** A good wife is important to the success of a man (Behind every successful man is a woman).

13. *nze e bide m'mwad mim anag epun kwen ne e wuuwe moh ne ehion yiol.*

When you give your wife palm wine on a sacred day, you are also destroying yourself.

**Meaning:** It is important to be protective of one's wife, or there will be dire consequences not only to the wife but to the husband as well.

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