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SEXIST LANGUAGE AND THE CAMPUS LINGO OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ILORIN STUDENTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR GENDER ATTITUDES

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Introduction

Language has been variously defined by scholars across times and climes. While giving various definitions of language by scholars, Crystal (1997:400) goes ahead to submit that it has been an object of fascination and a subject of serious enquiry for over 2000 years. Language occupies such a central position in the affairs of human beings for study because it is peculiar to them. It is the instrument of thought and the tool of communication. It is the kind of language that a person uses, hears or reads that shapes, to a surprising extent, the world he lives in. As the bricks with which language is built are words, Birk and Birk (1959:3) posit that mere words can make and prevent wars, create understanding or inflame prejudice, form constitutions or destroy them, sell shoddy or superior products or ideas, justify man's worst actions or express his highest ideals. Indeed, our contemporary world depends on words: how to form them; use or manipulate them; interpret and reconstruct them to fashion out reality (Adedimeji, 2002:1).

The dynamism of language and the constraints of culture within which it functions often make it sensitive and powerful. Among other peculiarities, language, which we use English language to represent in this study, often underpins gender. Gender is defined as a socially constructed phenomenon that is, brought about as society ascribes different roles and duties, behaviours and mannerisms to the sexes, a perpetual feature affecting the way people act/behave towards

each other (Njabili, cited in Okebukola, 2004). Sex, on the other hand, is a biological category fixed before birth and the difference between the two is illustrated with a bicycle. Bicycle saddles designed for women are usually wider than saddles designed for men as a result of women's wider pelvic girdle (a sex difference). Bicycles without a cross bar, so riders can wear skirts, are designed in response to a gender difference, though no biological reason exists why women wear skirts and men do not in some cultures (Thomas and Wareing, 1999:66; Coates, 1993).

Sexist language therefore is the representation of women and men unequally through speech or writing as if members of one sex were somehow less completely human, less complex and had fewer rights than members of the other sex. For instance, North American English has no fewer than 220 lexical items for a sexually promiscuous woman, but only twenty for sexually promiscuous men. Also, in London, school children are believed to have a rich vocabulary of insult terms for girls, all related to sexual behaviour while very few refer to boys (Hudson, 1996:103). Sexist language presents sex stereotypes by which opinions, beliefs, behaviours and activities are considered appropriate for males and females (Oke'ikola, 2004, Yahaya, 1999:134). The thrust of this study lies in the observation of aspects of gender inequality occasioned by sexist use of language in the slang or contemporary lingo prevalent among the University of Ilorin students. Part of the aim is to highlight sexism in the language system of the studied speech community and illustrate the universality of sexism among students, not only of North America or Britain but also in Nigeria. The implications of this form of language especially on gender equality and attitudes are discussed.

Gender Inequality: A Conceptual Review

Gender inequality, or unfair representation of males and females, has often characterised every stratum of our global and local societies (Okolo, 2001). The positive aspects of this gender inequality always favour men, such as in educational enrolment (Ango, 2000; Makhubu, cited in Okebukola, 2004; Olasehinde-Williams, 2004) educational achievement (Danmole, 1998), employment opportunities

(Uwe, 1999) etc. while the negative aspects affect women (Esere, 2004; Jekayinfa, 2004). Factors attributed to this social imbalance include a conflux of unequal socio-cultural, economic, educational and training issues called gender stereotyping. This pervasive gender stereotyping is ingrained in the society through primary socialisation process, the school learning environment, classroom interactions, the curriculum content and indeed the instructional process.

This palpable gender inequality has occasioned the prevalent clamour for women empowerment (Yahaya, 1999; Olasehinde-Williams, 2004 etc.) and the ideological concept of feminism, which has also attracted a lot of scholarly attention and exposition (Weedon, 1987; Mills, 1995; Cameron, 1998; Joseph, 2001 etc.) Despite the findings and recommendations of these studies, the female gender still continues to be victim of all forms of harassment and language bias especially in the school context. Sexist language or message, for instance, is often targeted at women who feel embarrassed while men feel entertained. In other words, there is always a tendency, as observed by Hudson (1996:102) that 'female words' tend to have less favourable meanings. Thus, women are often made to suffer the physical and psychical punishment inflicted on them by men through unfavourable characterisation. It is only on few occasions that men fall victim of sexism. An example of sexism against men is contained in the readers' suggestions for the phrase of *tomboy*, in a 1997 edition of *Daily Mail* (cited in Thomas and Wareing, 1999:75). Responses received are:

HRT (Husband Replacement Therapy), Youthfool, Wrinkle Picker, Joy Boy, GIBBET (Good In Bed But Extremely Temporary), Manstress, Sugar Laddie, POW (Prefers Older Women), Mutton Fodder and Booster Rooster, Glad Lad, Juvenile Lead, Studlet, Born-Later-Babe, Bimboy, Bounty Hunter, Nappy Chappy, Ego Booster, Mini Mate, Play Mite, Lap Chap and Tom Kitten, Muscle Tussle, Handsome Samson, Younger Monger, Romp Tot, Cub Class, Game Boy and Sapling, Homelette, Boncubine, Little Soldier, Beddyboy, Passion Puppy, Honkybonk, Kideology Kid and Himbo.

For, in language, stereotypes and prototypes are made to reflect attitudes to the two sexes. Stereotypes are clearly restricted in reference to one sex or the other. The opposite of 'master' is 'mistress' but mistress has a further connotation that is negative (a partner in an extra-marital relationship). Various cultures have proverbs which purport that "women are necessary evils". A University degree holder has a Bachelor degree even if she is a spinster. 'Man' has a generic use in a way 'woman' is not, suggesting that the latter term is inferior. Despite their inclusion in dictionaries, many people still consider 'chairwoman' and 'chairperson' as anachronisms. 'Housemaid' and 'houseman' ordinarily appear as gender forms but a housemaid is a domestic servant while houseman is a doctor, more or less.

Furthermore, a man is always a 'Mr' irrespective of his (personal) marital life but English language differentiates between 'Mrs' and 'Miss' and the recent attempt to remedy the situation through the introduction of 'Ms', though successful to some extent in gaining patronage, is still invested with negative connotations (a divorcee, an unmarried mother) compounded by its oddity in both spelling and pronunciation. Prototypes on the other hand, tend to suggest conceptual inequality—the standard and the non-standard. This is obvious in many professions; a doctor is conceived to be a male and a nurse is deemed a female by 'standard' analogy. Scientist, engineer, lawyer all seem to have male prototypes while secretary, housekeeper have females as prototypes.

The Sociolinguistics of Campus Lingo

Sociolinguistics simply deals with the interrelationship between language and society. The value of sociolinguistics, defined as 'the study of language in relation to society' is the light which it throws on the nature of language in general, and on the characteristics of some particular language (Hudson, 1996:4). The field of sociolinguistics is concerned with the influence that society, its structures and its needs exert on language use by showing:

how language reflects differences in age or status between interlocutors (speakers); how it reflects regional, cultural or socio-political peculiarities; how it reflects the various functions of language within society (Oloruntoba-Oju, 1999:122).

As the focus of sociolinguistic study is the language of a particular society, it goes without saying that it is concerned with any speech situation, setting, domain or linguistic community (Yule, 1996:239). As such, a barrack, a prison, a market, a hospital, a courtroom and indeed a university campus, just to mention a few, all constitute different domains or societies where language is used based on the background, the psychology and orientation of those who constitute them. It is quite easy, by careful observation, for instance, to distinguish a barrack from a hospital, or a prison yard from a university campus by listening to the language use or sociolect of the contexts, with their peculiar lingo: registers and linguistic nuances or slang. A sociolect is the speech variety peculiar to a social group within the society (Sotiloye, 1992:143). It is associated with slang or lingo, evidenced in Jimoh (1994), which I construe as a form of linguistic transaction mutually intelligible to the members of the same social or occupational group. A slang is a very "informal language mainly used in speaking and is not thought suitable for formal situation" (Briggs, 1990:975). Campus lingo or slang expressions are thus an informal kind of language use in which words and phrases are used in new and unusual ways: they are expressive, humorous and vivid among people, such as students, with similar interests (Crowther, 1995:111).

Language is used to serve different functions, among which are communication of ideas, emotional expression (frustration), social interaction (greeting), the power of sound (alliteration), the control of reality (magic), recording of facts (record keeping), the instrument of thought and the expression of identity (the signalling of who we are and where we 'belong') (Crystal, 1997:10-13; Adedimeji, 2002:3-4). In the University of Ilorin, almost all these functions are represented in the students' lingo. The fact that language has often been used to represent women unfairly, partly informing feminism and gender

studies (Acholonu, 1995; Adebayo, 1996; Oyebanji, 1999 and 2000, Anyikwa, 1999; Mallum and Mogbo, 1999, Uwe, 1999, Petrova, 2002) makes gender inequality prevail. Sexism also characterises students' lingo in Nigeria, and the example of the University of Ilorin is evident. The females are often diminished, lampooned and harassed by slang. This situation is reinforced by the assertion that the English language is 'inherently sexist' (Thomas and Wareing, 1999:67). The effects of this scenario will be discussed later.

Research Methodology

The present researcher had often been fascinated and disgusted by the students' lingo and he is ultimately interested in it. A class of about 80 students was asked to write such slang expressions prevalent among students. Each student was asked to write a minimum of five and a maximum of ten slang with their meanings. More than a hundred data were collected through the process, after all instances of repetition have been removed. The repetition of certain slang suggested their validity to the researcher, complemented by his own experience too, having been operating or functioning in the university environment for a decade – first as a student and later as a lecturer.

The data were subsequently administered on another class of students. Their familiarity with most of the items in the data confirmed their authenticity and the data were further pruned to about fifty. It is from those fifty that forty were randomly selected for the present study. Those that are too strange or too common because of their doubted validity were those removed during selection. The data were observed to have been sourced from a complexity of morphological and sociolinguistic phenomena including acronymy, conversion, substitution, drift, transfer, coinage, pidginisation, neologism, widening, borrowing, interlading, etc. the discussion of which is constrained by the limitation of the present study.

Results

Based on the studies of Jimoh (1994) who investigated the dynamics of campus lingo from a psycholinguistic perspective and Petrova (2002) who classified and discussed gender issues in English proverbs, classification is also adopted for the present study. The data collected are appraised under five categories to reveal sexist linguistic behaviour in the University. These categories are:

- (a) Positive to male (PM)
- (b) Negative to male (NM)
- (c) Positive to female (PF)
- (d) Negative to female (NF)
- (e) General / Neutral (G/N)

The classification is informed by the semantic implications that the campus lingo engender within the university among the students. The classification is general and the positivity or negativity of a slang item is determined by the meaning being favourable or unfavourable/less favourable. An item that has an unfavourable meaning in being abusive or insulting is considered 'negative' even though it is noted that such item may be corrective. Gender bias or inequality is based on the tendency of not representing physiological features with which females are lampooned in the males. The slang classified 'general or neutral' are those that are not specific to any sex (Hudson, 1996:103).

Campus Lingo	Semantic Implication /Meaning
Group A (Positive to Male)	
1. Cat	A handsome boy
2. Baff up	To dress well so as to impress ladies
3. Nnamdi	A corporately dressed young man
4. Bloke	A handsome young man, a 'fine guy'
Group B (Negative to Male)	
5. Scrub	A boy that attaches himself to others; a pest
6. Sissy	An effeminate boy
7. Scope master	A boy who tells lies, a trickster

8. B Block / C Block major	An unserious boy that always patronises female hostels (on the mini campus)
Group C (Positive to Female)	
9. Skele	A beautiful girl
10. Snazzy	Beautiful, attractive, pretty (referring to girls)
Group D (Negative to Female)	
11. Big mum	A fat girl, usually unattractive
12. Cowbell(girl)	A girl with big breasts
13. Opened carton	Fresh female students that have been defiled
14. Kaka	A girl with big buttocks
15. Domitilla	A promiscuous girl; a prostitute
16. Gbovo	A lousy girl
17. Aristo	A sugar daddy
18. Supersonic attraction	The two (big) breasts of a girl
19. Deborah girls	Busy bodies, female gossips
20. Pigeon	A girl that attaches herself to other people (feminine form of 'scrub')
21. Chicala	A sexy girl; a sex commodity
22. Sparees	Prostitutes, harlots (among students)
23. Sabbatical Bottomity	Female students temporarily abandoned by their lovers on account of their immoral dealings.
24. Ayangba	A prostitute
Campus Lingo	
25. Head lamps	Female breasts, girls with large breasts
26. Bus	A girl friend, a mere sexual object.
27. Drive(f)	To have sex with; the driver is the lover boy who 'drives' the 'bus'.
28. Nail	Same as 'drive', to have sex with a girl.
29. Backyard	Females' buttocks, especially when they are large
30. Ever ready	Nymphomaniac; a girl who finds it

31. Merry-go-round	hard to refuse sexual proposal, other terms according to Jimoh (1994:166) are 'kick-and-pass', 'hot pants', 'one nighter' which are no longer in use. A girl that engages in sex with almost/all members of a group of friends.
Group E (General /Neutral)	
32. World Bank	Toilet; also known as 'comfort station'
33. NFA	No Future Ambition; unserious student
34. FFO	For Food Only; in reference to greedy or gluttonous students
35. Masquerade	A cheat, especially in the examination
36. Micro chips	Prepared / written materials brought hidden into the examination hall
37. Stab(bo)	To fail to attend a lecture. A stabbo is a truant who doesn't attend lectures
38. Float(er)	Somebody who doesn't have accommodation and moves from one friend's room or hostel to another on a daily basis. Other terms here are 'squatter', (a student living with his friend without partaking in paying rent charges), 'hanger', (a student with no personal accommodation who spends a week with one friend and the other with another)
39. Yearn(O.P)	To prat, to 'gist' or talk. To 'yearn o.p' (off point) is to pontificate or 'talk nonsense'.
40. Efficco	A studious student, also referred to as Efficophita, Jacky, Jackobia, Jackometer.

Discussion

The foregoing presentation confirms the truism that our society is still largely a gender polarized one. Underlining this gender polarity that often tends to disfavour women is the interest in sex-related matters by the students. In the larger society where cultural trappings constrain reference to sex, the students use their supposed freedom to explore, exploit and create sexist linguistic usage. It can be surmised that a major feature of the Nigerian campus lingo is sex. Of the forty item here studied, 4 or 10% are male-positive (i.e positive to male, PM) while another 4 or 10% are male negative (negative to male, NM). This shows that for every negative slang against men, there is a positive slang to save their face. This is not so with women as 2 or 5% constitute female-positive (positive to female, PF) while as many as 21 or 52.5% are female-negative (negative to female, NF). The fact that the number of female-negative slang on campus is more than half of the entire data is indicative of male domination or linguistic discrimination against females on campus. Slang that are general or gender neutral (i.e G/N) are 9 or 22.5%.

The implication of this result is that Nigerians or Nigerian students are fond of talking about sex. The exploitation of sexist language and images in journalism, advertising, business, institutions, etc. has a psychological dimension of creating and promoting interest in sexism, usually in an 'unlawful way'. In fact, it has been concluded that 'sex is an undergraduate' (cited in Jimoh, 1994:171) as a result of excessive indulgence in it, culminating in, directly or indirectly, the estimated 6.5 million people infected today by HIV/AIDS in Nigeria (Madu, 2004:16).

A graphic representation of the result is presented thus:

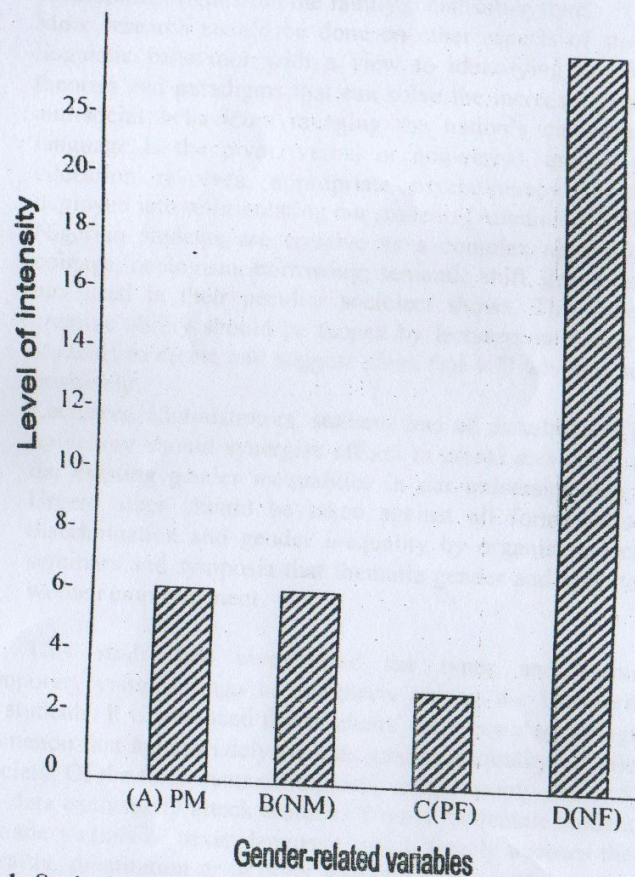


Fig. 1: Sexist language usage among University of Ilorin students

It is also observed that most items of the contemporary campus lingo are offensive, abusive and derogatory in nature. A substantial number of the studied campus lingo, about 80%, relates to all forms of abusive behaviour. The reason for this may be due to aiming at

humour or to be corrective, to lessen tension, at the expense of the other. In spite of the level of intellectual attainment existing in the university environment, it appears wrong that banalities are the most prominent lingo among an important segment of its members (the students). Perhaps, the drastically reducing age of the university students, first from matured adults to impressionistic adolescents and their peculiar psychosocial developmental outcomes, is responsible (cf. Adedimeji, 2004:4). Hence, with students' indulgence in offensive or abusive linguistic behaviour, language, the vehicle with which education is conveyed becomes affected. The cognitive (having to do with knowledge, understanding, application, synthesis and evaluation) and affective domains (concerning values, attitudes, interest, adjustment, habits, perception, social relations and beliefs) of learning become distorted (Owolabi, 2004:93)

Above all, as the major groups of any society often, not necessarily always, have the power, based on their numerical strength, to dominate, cheat and suppress the others, another finding of this study is that there are more men in the university system of Nigeria than women. This is not especially new; it is rather a confirmation of the previous findings (Olasehinde-Williams, 2004; Okebukola, 2004). It is rather advanced here that men use the power of their numerical strength to molest and dominate women, with a focus on students here.

Recommendations and Conclusion

On the basis of our analysis of aspects of the linguistic behaviour of the University of Ilorin students, it is observed that slang, students' sociolects or campus lingo have implications for cognitive and affective domains of learning, especially in relation to gender; thus, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. As the tongue is the messenger of the mind, campus lingo are veritable means of peeping into the minds of the students. And based on the finding here that students, generally speaking tend to be corrupt-minded, leading to obscene and indecent sexist language often aimed at insulting or abusing female students, appropriate guidance and counselling strategies

- should be deployed into enhancing their positive psychosocial development right from the family social sub-system.
2. More research should be done on other aspects of students' linguistic behaviour with a view to identifying appropriate theories and paradigms that can solve the increasing wave of anti-social behaviours ravaging the nation's campuses. As language is the pivot, verbal or non-verbal, around which education revolves, appropriate psychotherapy should be deployed into re-orientating our students (Adedimeji, 2004).
 3. Nigerian students are creative as a complex application of coinage, neologism, borrowing, semantic shift, generalisation, etc. used in their peculiar sociolect shows. This ingenious creative ability should be tapped by lecturers in encouraging students to create and suggest ideas that will advance society positively.
 4. Lecturers, administrators, students and all stakeholders in the university should synergise efforts to create awareness about the existing gender inequalities in our university campuses. Urgent steps should be taken against all forms of sexual discrimination and gender inequality by organising lectures, seminars and symposia that thematize gender and appertain to women empowerment.

This study has investigated the types and forms of contemporary campus lingo or sociolects among the University of Ilorin students. It is advanced that students' lingo are a sociolinguistic phenomenon that appropriately typifies gender inequality prevalent in the society. Of the forty items of linguistic usage, twenty-one or 52.5% of the data exclusively attack women. Women or female students are thus made victims of sexist language which largely accuses them of immorality, prostitution or in other less favourable representations all couched in offensive, provocative, obscene language full of banalities, especially when considered from feminine perspectives. Situation is a reflection of what operates in the larger society where women are victims of domestic violence, unfavourable job conditions and a plethora of other gender-based problems.

As sociolinguistics is a field of study that relates societal problems to linguistic/language problems (Sotiloye, 1992:134), this study has attempted to address gender inequality from the purview of the linguistic repertoires of the Nigerian students, specifically those of the University of Ilorin. It is found that like their counterparts in North America and Europe, (Graddol and Swann, 1989:110) Nigerian students have a rich vocabulary of offensive and obscene slang items that mostly insult females. The study thus confirms the observation that (English) language itself is sexist and efforts toward women empowerment should begin from ridding language of unfavourable sexist representations. The study further suggests a thorough educational process for the students such that their cognitive and affective domains would be further developed.

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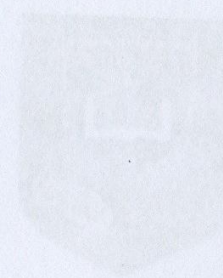
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