

SEXISM AS AN ASPECT OF FACE THREATENING ACT: A STUDY OF SELECTED SPEECH SITUATIONS

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Abstract

The effects of heightened gender consciousness as a result of creative awareness by feminist scholars and linguist have continued to influence women's linguistic perception of male dominance in communication. This study has investigated the linguistic phenomenon of sexism as a form of face threatening act. It is motivated by the fact that the use of dehumanizing language, gender exclusive language as well as negative cultural practices such as male child preference have continued to be a linguistic instrument of perpetuating sexist language in the African society. The theoretical framework of this study is hinged on politeness theory of Brown and Levinson. The method of data collection is anchored on direct participant observation. This study used conversational settings such as family and church meetings to examine the linguistic phenomena of sexism as a form of face threatening acts from the perspectives of diverse speech situations. This study revealed that sexism constitutes an overt as well as covert face threatening act. It was also discovered that the sociolinguistic and cultural factors that encourage sexism in different speech situations in Anambra State are the socio-linguistic assumption promoted by culture and religion which assumes that the male gender is stereotypically superior to the female gender. The linguistic implication of sexism as a form of face threatening act is that a sexist motivated impoliteness constitute verbal scar that it is intended to devalue the positive face of female co-interactants in a given speech situation. The study recommends that there is the need for female scholars, linguists and writers to be more focused in challenging patriarchal gender identity constructions that encourage the propagation of sexist face threatening language use in mixed gender communication.

Keywords: sexism, face threatening act, verbal scar and linguistic facelessness

1.0 Introduction

The controversies surrounding sexism as a form of face threatening act is the driving force behind this study which aims at discovering linguistic markers of sexism as an aspect of face threatening act. In gender studies, scholars, researchers and linguists have continued to lay emphasis on the use of effective, objective, persuasive, gender-friendly and acceptable communication patterns and expressions among humans. This is crucial because effective communication is fundamental towards creating and sustaining self-esteem, peace and sustainable interpersonal relationship in every linguistic community. Secondly, due to the age long culture of male dominance, men are always portrayed as being responsible for protecting women and the family members; because they are assumed as the main breadwinners of the family.

Tannen (1990) highlights this socio-cultural difference, claiming that females and males are trained or brought up from childhood to comply with different conversational styles, "private speaking" "rapport talk" for the females and "public speaking" "report talk" for the males. This postulation is a linguistic reality in the African society where women have continued to be relegated to the background. In fact, men and women use language differently because they belong to two different subcultures. In essence, the stereotypical upbringing of children in the African society is built on the background that a girl must think and talk like a woman and a boy must talk, command and act like a man. Wareing (1999) adds that women are less-assertive in language use and use "gossip" for conversational solidarity. Guimei (2010) on the other hand points out that language is far from merely reflecting the nature of society; it serves as a primary means of constructing and maintaining that society. Its existence and development are closely linked with the social attitudes of human beings and to a great

extent are affected by their social views and values. Specifically, people's socio-cultural behaviours and attitudes as well as thoughts are reflected in their use of the language.

Furthermore, the African society is man-oriented and man-centered. This fuels all forms of gender discrimination through the use of language. Sexism in language use is a reflection of gender domination of women in social realities. However, there appears to be a gap in the study of sexism as it relates to what marks out sexism as an aspect of face threatening act. The objectives of this paper is to textually analyze linguistic phenomena of sexism as an aspect of face threatening through analyzing the lexical and grammatical features that encode the linguistic incidence of sexism as a form gender identity suppression, intimidation and facelessness designed to damage the positive face of women. This study will also highlight on the politeness strategies embedded in sexist expressions in order to ascertain how they constitute face threatening act.

2.0 Conceptual Clarifications

It is pertinent to discuss concepts such as sexism, face threatening act, politeness strategy because they will be useful for the achievement of the objectives of this paper. Sexism is defined in this study as a prejudice or discrimination based on a person's sex or gender. Sexism can affect anyone, but it primarily affects women and girls. Matsumoto (2001) posits that this practice is linked to stereotypes and gender roles which have been assigned to members of a linguistic community. Based on this argument, the sex or gender of an individual determines acceptable linguistic role that they are expected to play within their linguistic community and beyond. Witt (2017) points out that extreme sexism may foster sexualharassment, rape, and other forms of sexual violence. This has introduced a different form of sexism which is hinged on discrimination toward people based on their gender identity, or sex differences such that they must adhere to their assigned linguistic roles.

However, Wilson's (1997) definition of sexism seems to be more comprehensive. He posits that sexism is a form of expectations of women's appearances, actions, skills, emotions and proper place in society. A sexist action is therefore, one which is predicated on an assumption of a difference between men and women which is not biologically justified and which is harmful to the peaceful and sustainable development and coexistence in the society. Graddol and Swan (1989) see sexism as any discrimination against women or men because of their sex made up on irrelevant grounds. The concept of sexism is also related to gender stereotypes. Manstead, Hewstone, Miles et al. (1999) postulate that the notion of gender stereotype is a widely held belief about the characteristics and behaviour of women and men. The fact remains that sexism in language exists when language devalues members of a certain gender. Therefore, sexist language, in many instances, promotes male superiority which affects consciousness, perceptions of reality, encoding and transmitting cultural meanings and socialization.

Furthermore, the ideology behind the linguistic phenomena of sexism is that male gender is superior. This is the linguistic motivation that has encouraged sexism for many years. Ezenwa-Ohaeto (2013) posits that language serves as the expressive vehicle of ideologies. In other words, ideologies are identified within the structures, style, system and content of the language. With particular reference to discourse events, ideologies are situated and expressed in discourses. Ezenwa-Ohaeto (2015) further points out that the male gender is both the primary and secondary beneficiary of these practices in the society while the female gender has remained the victim of this deliberately instituted interests and privileges that have been appropriated by one group over the other. From the foregoing, the working definition of this study is that sexism is an intentional, unfair and unwarranted discrimination of people based on the biological phenomenon of sex.

Sexist language is considered to be any language that is supposed to include all people, but intentionally excludes a gender. This is especially common in situations that describe jobs—common assumptions include that all doctors are men, all nurses are women, all coaches are men, or all teachers are women. Most people would agree that these assumptions are largely untrue today, though the language used often perpetuates the stereotypes. According to Atkinson (1993) linguistic sexism is a wide range of verbal practices, including not only how women are labelled and referred to, but also

how language strategies in mixed sex interaction may serve to silence or depreciate women as interactants. Ivy and Backlund (1994) added that if sexism refers to attitudes and/or behaviours that denigrate one sex to the exaltation of the other, then it follows that sexist language would be verbal communication that conveys those attitudes or behaviours. At its crudest and most hurtful, sexist language is a tool used to damage someone.

Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams (2007) typify the discrimination against women by quoting Graham's analogy:

If a woman is swept off a ship into the water, the cry is man overboard. If she is killed by a hit-and-run driver, the charge is manslaughter. If she is injured on the job, the coverage is workmen 's compensation. But if she arrives at the threshold marked Men Only, she knows the admonition is not intended to bar animals or plants or inanimate objects. It is meant for her.

Obviously, the stereotype for a woman must be everything bad while in the same circumstance, a man is always dignified. This shows the level at which language has demeaned women. Many feminists have examined the representation of women in language and have, according to Cameron (1998) concluded that our language is sexist because they represent or name the world from a masculine viewpoint and in accordance with stereotyped beliefs about the sexes. This means that language encodes a cultural value, and in this way reflects sexist culture. Cameron (1998) further states that:

Language could be seen as a reflection of sexist culture. It could be seen as carrier of ideas and assumptions which become, through their constant re-enactment in discourse, so familiar and conventional we miss their significance. Thus, sexism is not merely reflected but acted out and thus reinforced in a thousand banal encounters.

Another issue critical for this study is, Face-Threatening. As Mey (2001) rightly points out that the need to save face is recognised by languages and is an important socio-linguistic concept in human interaction deriving from notions of politeness. Linguistic interaction, however, threatens interlocutors face and this is why speakers use linguistic strategies that express solidarity and minimise potential threats both for themselves and the hearers.

More so, a politeness strategy is a strategy that is used to prevent a violation of the hearer's face. To Brown & Levinson (1987), politeness strategies are developed in order to save the hearers "face". Face refers to the respect that an individual has for maintaining "self-esteem" in public or in private situations. Usually, a person tries to avoid embarrassing the other person, or making them feel uncomfortable by the language used in the process of communication. Face threatening acts (FTA's) are acts that infringe on the hearers need to maintain his self-esteem, and be respected. Consequent upon this, politeness strategies are developed for the main purpose of dealing with these face threatening acts. There are four types of politeness strategies, described by Brown and Levinson that sum up human "politeness" behaviour. These are bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off record-indirect strategies.

Lakoff (1973) is of the view that politeness is a system of interpersonal relations designed to facilitate interaction by minimizing the potential for conflict and confrontation inherent in all human interchange. While Fraser (1990) presents the notion of politeness as a conversational contract as he further states that, "upon entering into a given conversation, each party brings an understanding of some initial set of rights and obligations that will determine, at least for the preliminary stages, what the participants can expect from others".

In sociolinguistics, strategies adopted in politeness reveal the concern for others and minimize threats to self-esteem, "face" in given contexts of language use. **Politeness strategies** are known to be positive when they are intended to save 'face' by demonstrating degrees of friendliness. These strategies include placing disapproval with compliments, establishing cordiality by adopting jokes, nicknames, compliments, tag questions, special discourse markers and certain jargon and slang that are common to a given class or a social group. Also, **politeness strategies** are known to be negative when they

appear to give offence by detracting from the choice of complimentary expressions. These strategies include questioning, hedging, and presenting disagreements as opinions. The best known and most widely used approach to the study of politeness is the framework introduced by Brown & Levinson. Their theory of linguistic politeness is sometimes referred to as the "'face-saving' theory of politeness.

Therefore, politeness focuses on awareness of another person's face while presenting one's own face. To accept somebody's face means using strategies which are either threatening or saving and which express a negative or a positive face respectively. These strategies help to establish social distance, respect, deference or closeness, solidarity or friendship, depending on the situation and the used strategies. Also, if something is said which could be seen as a threat to somebody else's self-image, it is called a face threatening act. Face-threatening acts (FTA's), are liable to threaten or damage the hearer's positive face through expressions of disapproval/criticism, accusations, contradictions, interruption, expressions of violent emotions, etc., and threaten his/her negative face, i.e. orders, requests, reminding, offers, promise, etc. Moreover, certain acts can also be face threatening to the speaker's positive face, such as expressing thanks, excuses, acceptance of offers/apologies, etc, as well as his/her negative face, such as apologies, acceptance of compliments, confessions/admissions of guilt or responsibility, etc. For Cameron (1998) women are usually "negotiating their relatively powerless position in interaction with men". She further argues that interruptions, turn-constructions, verbosity, and floor management in verbal interactions are seen to be less in the grasp of women than men. But Litosseliti (2006) views the demarcation of women's and men's language as traceable to the two sexes' different socialisations.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

The framework of this study is based on politeness theory of Brown and Levinson propounded in 1987. They see politeness as a form of universals in language usage". The generality of Brown and Levinson's theory focuses on 'face'. According to them, face could be at risk any time interlocutors communicate and each participant in a normal human communication has two types of face need - a positive face need and a negative face need. The positive face need is said to be the positive consistent self-image or personality claimed by a person in which he desires to be treated in a friendly manner.

While the negative face need, is the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, freedom of action and freedom from imposition. Positive politeness attends to a person's positive face and includes such speech acts as compliments, invitations, greetings, expressions of goodwill and solidarity. On the other hand, negative politeness attends to a person's negative face need and includes indirectness and apologies. It expresses respect and consideration.

Besides, Brown and Levinson's model person chooses from three super ordinate types of strategies when a face-threatening act is to be performed. They are doing the act on record, doing the act off record and not doing the act at all. Of these strategies, the first, doing the act on record is the most usual. They also outlined four main types of politeness strategies: bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness and off-the-record or indirect strategy.

The Bald on Record Politeness Strategy

The bald on record politeness strategy makes no attempt to minimize possible threats to the hearer's face while communicating. Speakers who have a close relationship with their audience may engage in this kind of strategy, as there is every possibility that the addressee feels embarrassed by the speech act. More direct expressions, for example, are mostly used between friends or relations. For instance, telling your brother to 'wash the car' or a friend to 'come to your house'. When these statements or the likes are said bluntly to acquaintances or visitors, the speaker is likely to be perceived as one who is impolite.

Positive Politeness

Positive politeness, on the other hand, attempts to minimize the possible threats to the hearer's face as interlocutors may know themselves fairly well. An example is, 'I know you have spent a lot this

season, but could you lend me five hundred naira?’ The speaker here takes into cognizance the fact that the hearer has got other things to do with his money before making his request.

Negative Politeness

Negative politeness on its own part, presumes that the speaker will be imposing on the hearer. The possibility of feeling embarrassed is more in this strategy than the former two. The desire for one to remain autonomous is what is meant by negative face. That is why, a request made without putting into consideration the hearer’s negative face will show imposition.

Indirect Politeness Strategy

The indirect politeness strategy includes the use of indirect language by a speaker so that he is seen as one who is not imposing. Generally speaking, the more indirect the expression one uses, the politer one will appear. A speaker who says: ‘it is getting hot in her room’ could mean that the fan be switched on even though not said explicitly and not having directly required any to do the switching on.

From the foregoing, it is evident that there is a great need to maintain the face wants of others in the communicative act. Any speech act that falls short of this is taken as an intrusion on the co-interactants personal space and this is consequently labeled a Face Threatening Act (FTA). One commits this act whenever one behaves in a way that could potentially fail to meet positive face needs.

4.0 Methodology

The sources of data for this study comprise speeches situations such as church meeting, and tenants’ meetings. The rationale for the choice of the speech situation is based on the assumption that studying different speech situations will help the researcher to investigate the phenomenon of sexism as a form of face threatening act from different sociolinguistic backgrounds. The method of data collection of this work is anchored on direct participant observation. This method is suitable because it will enable the researcher to have a first-hand encounter on the phenomena of sexism.

In this study, textual analysis will be used as a tool for data analysis. The study is anchored on politeness theory of Brown and Levinson. The purpose of textual analysis is to describe the content, structure, and functions of the messages contained in transcribed conversation in line with the objectives of the study. The theories utilized in this study are interrelated because they aim at describing, interpreting and critiquing social life, realities and ideologies reflected in the text.

5.0 Results and Data Analysis

The transcribed textual data from different speech situations used in this study were drawn from different speech situations such as tenants meeting and church committee meetings.

Data A. Tenants meeting

Text 1:

Mr. Okoye: these idle people that want to become men will not allow us to rest in this compound!

From the above text, it was revealed that there are lexical features that mark out face threatening sexist language. In text 1, the use of “these” “that” “us” attest to this fact. The use of the adjective “these” is an obvious linguistic sexist string that clearly portray the negative gender identity which in turn set the stage for grievance face threatening act.

The linguistic import of the word these idle people ideologically portrays that there is something negative about being a woman. Hence, the use of the utterance: *these idle people that want to become men will not allow us to rest in this compound!*

Secondly, the use of the words “these idle people” is a sexist utterance that is overtly face threatening. This is factual because the use of such words is meant to undermine the positive face of the women present at the meeting and indeed all women in general.

Text 2:

Mr. Joseph: *I thought we (the men) have agreed in our last meeting that they (the women) should be in charge of sweeping this compound and mobbing the stair case?*

In text 2, the decisive nature of chauvinistic tendency embedded in lexical items that mirror sexist expression is brought to the fore. The use of the words “we the men” clearly point to this fact. This study has clearly shown that sexist expressions are not only man-oriented or man-centered words but they also include words that discriminate against the women on the basis of their sexual identity.

Here in text 2, the use of the words;

- (a) “we the men” (assertion of chauvinistic authority),
- (b) “in our last meeting” (men’s meeting previously held to discuss the issue prior to the general meeting),
- (c) “they the women” (exclusive female gender maker),
- (d) “should be in charge of sweeping this compound and mobbing the stair case” (gender intimidation),

is a clear portrayal of the culture bound persistent second-class status of the African women. The linguistic importance of the word “they” is conceived to relegate the women to the background. Even when all the tenants both male and female are paying the same house rent still their status can never be equal with the male co-interactant in this speech situation.

The use of the collective pronoun “we” as seen above is another lexical item that has sexist ideology. For instance: *I thought we the men have agreed in our last meeting.* The above sentence points to the fact that the role an African woman performs and how she should be referred to has been sociolinguistically predetermined and sustained from generation to generation by the patriarchal African culture.

Text 3:

Nwamaka: *Mr. Okoye. Who are the idle women in this compound? Why do you always think that men are more important than women? Please we.... (she was interrupted)*

Text 3 is an attempt at gender assertiveness and the quest for the negotiation of equal linguistic power and treatment. In the above text, Nwamaka questions the assertion by asking the question: *Who are the idle women in this compound? Why do you always think that men are more important than women.*

Furthermore, the third part of the text 3 “Please we....”

followed by an interruption reveals that linguistic interruption is another form of sexism as a form of face threatening act. Here, the interruption of Nwamaka is a clear indication of disrespect as a result of her sexual identity as a woman.

Text 4:

Mr Joseph: *(interrupts Nwamaka...) shut up your mouth Nwamaka... or whatever you call yourself, let me educate you. It is a taboo for men to be sweeping compound and scrubbing the floor when useless girls like you and other women that are supposed to be taking care of their crying babies are living here.*

A critical look at text 4 affirms linguistic interruption as an aspect of face threatening act.

Text 5:

Ikenna: *Bia this girl. You think you have gone to school; how do you expect an honorable like me an Ozo titled man in my community to be sweeping compound for you. I can see that you are you mad! One of these days, I will flog you at your bombom in this compound.*

In text 5, utterances that are face threatening such as:

- (1) Bia this girl.
- (2) You think you have gone to school!
- (3) I can see that you are mad
- (4) I will flog you at your bombom in this compound

Were used to reinforce the sexist and chauvinist orientation of the men participating in the above speech situations.

Data B. Church Meeting

Text 6:

Elder Chima: *We are here to select members of the seven-man committee for this year's harvest as instructed by our Rev.*

In the above church meeting, text 6 is a clear case of sexist expression that is also face threatening. For instance, the use of the collective pronoun 'we' to refer to the male interactants that want to select members of *seven-man committee* is also face threatening.

Text 7:

Mrs. Obiora: *Why 7-man committee members? Why do the men in this church always sideline women in spite of the great number of capable women we have and their numerous contributions for the growth of this church? First of all, I suggest that this year's harvest and bazaar chairman should be a woman. I think that....*

Text 7 is an attempt by a female interactants in the church meeting to oppose male gender dominance by asserting that the female gender is a capable human with immense potential of contributing to the progress of the church in any capacity.

Text 8

Bro Miracle: *(interrupts Mrs. Obiora) what do you mean? Have you seen or heard that a woman held the post of a chairman of the harvest and bazaar planning committee in this church? God Forbid. That suggestion is not good for us in the body of Christ. It is obvious here that our sisters here have turned a devilish blind eye to the teachings of our lord Jesus Christ in the Bible. Please, if they want to redeem their souls before it is too late, they should go and read: I Corinthians chapter 14 verse 34; "it says that women should remain silent in the churches". They are not allowed to speak. It is not proper for them to speak, but must be in submission as the law says. Brothers in Christ, am I the one that added this in the Bible? Christ himself placed women where he wants them to be. So, can we call master Jesus, the omnipotent God of all ages a man of injustice.*

A critical look at text 8 points to the sociolinguistic variables that fuel sexism as a form of face threatening act. The above text has shown that religion is one of the most dominant factor that encourage the use of sexist expression especially in a religious setting. This motivation is even supported by some popular verses of the Bible such as: *I Corinthians chapter 14 verse 34; "it says that women should remain silent in the churches"* as cited in text 8 by a male interactants.

Text 9:

Mrs. Grace: *We can still give it a trial. Who knows whether the result will be better in this year's harvest? We have to...*

Text 9 of the above text is also an indication that women are beginning to question sexist stereotype and men dominance of their gender in spite of the fact such practice has not yielded much positive result in terms of positive female gender identity reconstruction.

Text 10:

Bro James: *(interrupts) Taaa! Sit down. I say sit down. If you don't have anything reasonable to say just keep quiet. How can you utter such a nonsense? Women are meant to be under men and not the other way round. Let's not tempt our Lord Jesus Christ. I am certainly sure that we will get the same result we got from the Garden of Eden from that seductress and sinful woman, Eve who had sown a sinful seed in the heart of all women. I'm quite amazed! Women in this our church are beginning to be influenced by the sinful culture in this world. I wonder how our women will handle this executive post righteously without being deceived like Eve and other adulterous women in the Bible.*

Text 10 also reveal that interruption is a linguistic weapon in the hands of male chauvinist to perpetuate sexism and face threatening act. The above utterances are carefully preconceived notions aimed at suppressing and intimidating women in the African society.

6.0 Discussion

From the above text, it was been revealed that there are lexical features that mark out face threatening sexist language. For instance, the use of “these” “that” “us” attest to this fact. The use of the demonstrative adjective “these” is an obvious linguistic sexist string that clearly portrays the negative gender identity which in turn set the stage for the perpetuation of face threatening act. The linguistic import of the word these ‘idle people’ in text 1 ideologically portrays that there is something negative about being a woman. Hence, the use of the utterance: *these idle people that want to become men will not allow us to rest in this compound!*

The study also revealed that the chauvinistic tendency of the male gender in the African society correlates with the textual data examined in this study. It has shown that sexist expressions are not only man-oriented or man-centered words but they also include words that discriminates against women on the basis of their sexual identity. The study has also shown that linguistic interruption arising from the use of sexist expressions is as an aspect of face threatening act. The data analysis equally portrayed that linguistic interruption is a discourse weapon in the hands of male chauvinist to perpetuate sexism and face threatening act aimed at suppressing communicative power of women in the African society.

7.0 Conclusion

From the textual analysis of this study, it is obvious that sexist expressions are man-oriented or man-centered language. This study also found out that sexist expression can be seen as face threatening when negative, harsh, impolite lexical and grammatical words are encoded in the utterance. Again, gender suppression through the use of words that exclude the women is also an aspect of face threatening act because such utterance or words points out that women are of lesser or inferior value. Therefore, this study can categorically affirm that lopsided gender identity construction in favour of male gender is an aspect of face threatening act in the African society. The study discovered that negative politeness strategy was used extensively by male interactants to intimidate and harass their female counterparts linguistically and this constitute an obvious face threatening act.

8.0 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. There is an urgent need for female scholars, linguists and writer to be more focused in challenging patriarchal stereotypes in the African society through the production of literary works that will be an inspiration that will help to correct the negative socio-linguistic image of the Nigerian women and the girl child. Such works should focus on advocating for equitable distribution of housework, promoting male responsibility for fatherhood and inclusion of domestic work for all sexes at home and in the society at large.
2. Efforts should also be made by enlighten women to challenge the over bearing influence of culture and religion through counter narrative.
3. More serious efforts should also be articulated to linguistically challenge cultural taboos that subjugate women such as son preference and stereotypes in upbringing up of the boy and the girl child.
4. The government as well as women non-governmental organizations should vigorously promote the education of the girl child by championing the removal of gender stereotypes in the media that tend to portray woman as a second class citizen who is only capable of child rearing and cooking in the kitchen. This can be achieved by promoting radical and women sensitive interpretation of religion and sexuality.
5. Lastly, there is the need for female legislators at the federal and state level to sponsor bills that will make it a crime to harass a woman or a girl child linguistically and physically on the bases of her sex.

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