
Language and Gender Interaction in Yoruba: Proverbial Discourse

**Christiana N. Ikegwonu, Chinedum I. Enweonye
& R.I. Ibiowotisi**

Department of Linguistics/Igbo
Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University
Igbariam Campus

Abstract

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 Yoruba of the South West region of Nigeria 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 analyzed 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, Yoruba, proverbs, discourse.

Introduction

Language is the most vital communication tool for human beings. It not only reflects the reality of the society, but also has various goals to strengthen and maintain social existence (Ibiowotisi, 2010). In view of this, language does mirror the gendered perspectives and can also contribute to changing people's perception of gender over time. Thus, researches had shown that feminists, sociolinguists as well as folklorists have shown keen interest in describing the differences in language use between women and men, and studies of the cultural functions ascribed to gender. However, interest in language usage differences between the females and males 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 as result of this background that I intended to look into how Yoruba proverbial language is used in the Yoruba society to oppress women than men.

Feminists and linguists have argued that language is sexist in the sense that language generally indicates positive things for males while negative connotations are assumed for females. For example in the English language, the generic pronoun for human is 'man', woman inclusive; professions and important positions have primarily male biased; men are also associated with powerful symbols such as 'leopard', 'tiger etc. On the other hand, women are referred to with words such as 'baby', 'honey', 'sugar', 'pet', 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 in the world are guilty of this art of intimidation.

Researchers have been carried out to show that language can be used as a means of intimidating womanhood based on certain criteria. Many a time, the reason for making such decisions are rather arbitrary. Some of the factors used for the arbitrary decisions are: race, gender, colour, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, age, social class, religion, caste, occupation and language. This paper will find out how language has been used to exclude women from participating in decision making and even matters that are directly concern them. This paper also examines specific aspects of proverbial language of the Yoruba people of the South West Region of Nigeria 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 analyzed to ascertain the above argument.

Review of Literature

Brief overview of language and gender

Language can be defined from various perspectives. It is the verbal means with which human beings communicate and conduct social interaction. Also, 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 may be verbal, written or even through gestures.

It is men who have made the world which women must inhabit, and if women are to begin to make their own world, it is necessary that they understand some of the ways in which such creation is accomplished. That means exploring the relationship of language and reality (Spender 1985). In multilingual and multicultural environments like Nigeria, a unique opportunity is provided for studying, in its varied intralingual and interlingual forms, aspects of the structure and use of language that demonstrate the male control over the world asked. Sexism in language in general comes in three major forms: language ignores women, it defines them as less significant than men, and it out rightly deprecates the female (Gomard 1995). The English Language ignores (or obscures) women by allowing masculine terms to be used specifically to refer to males and generically to refer to human beings in general.

In the words of Gee (2011), language is a key way we humans make and break our world, our institutions and our relationships through how we deal with social goods.

In line with Gee's perception of language, the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach is chosen for this paper to see whether it can illuminate how some Yoruba proverbs use language power to manipulate and dominate women to believe that they are weak and cannot offer anything good to the society than bear children and only to be heard at the back ground in an Yoruba cultural setting. How some of these proverbs manipulatively dominate women and show male dominance including the subjugation of women.

Gender, a complex and multifaceted concept, has been explored and defined from various perspectives by scholars across different disciplines. In this essay, we delve into five detailed definitions of gender provided by notable authors, each offering a unique lens through which to understand this intricate phenomenon.

According to Butler (1990), gender is not a fixed or innate attribute but rather a social construct shaped by cultural, historical, and social forces. This definition emphasizes that gender roles, behaviors, and identities are not determined solely by biological sex but are instead performative acts that individuals enact within societal norms and expectations. Also, Bem (1993) views gender as encompassing not only biological sex but also psychological characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors associated with masculinity and femininity. Her work emphasizes the fluidity and variability of gender across different contexts, challenging traditional binary notions of gender identity and expression.

De Beauvoir (2011) defines gender as a system of power relations underscores how societal norms and expectations around gender roles serve to reinforce patriarchal hierarchies, leading to the marginalization and oppression of individuals based on their perceived sex. Crenshaw (1991), introduces an intersectional perspective on gender, highlighting the interconnectedness of gender with other social categories such as race, class, and sexuality. Crenshaw's definition emphasizes how individuals' experiences of gender are shaped by multiple intersecting identities, influencing their access to resources, opportunities, and social privileges within various systems of privilege and oppression.

Mead's anthropological perspective on gender emphasizes the cultural variability and diversity of gender norms and practices across different societies. Mead (2001), works on challenges of notion of gender as a universal and static concept, highlighting how

cultural beliefs and practices shape perceptions of masculinity and femininity, leading to a range of gender expressions and roles.

Amina (2006), defines gender as the social relationship between men and women and the way those relationships are made. She further describes gender as the division of society into biological, occupational and social roles like reproduction, production, community' management, politics and participation in other domestic and civil aspects of life. Women empowerment on the other hand transcends the gender dimensions of inequality.

Gender tends to denote the social and cultural role of each sex within a given society. Rather than being purely assigned by genetics, as sex differences generally are, people often develop their gender roles in response to their environment, including family interactions, the media, peers, and education.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines gender as: "the socially constructed characteristics of women and men, such as norms, roles, and relationships of and between groups of women and men. It varies from society to society and can be changed." Gender roles in some societies are more rigid than those in others. The degree of decision-making and financial responsibility expected of each gender and the time that women or men are expected to spend on homemaking and rearing children varies between cultures. Within the wider culture, families too have their norms. In many societies, men are increasingly taking on roles traditionally seen as belonging to women, and women are playing the parts previously assigned mostly to men. Gender is a term that refers to social or cultural distinctions associated with being male or female. Gender identity is the extent to which one identifies as being either masculine or feminine (Diamond, 2002). A person's sex, as

determined by his or her biology, does not always correspond with his or her gender.

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. More so, gender is also a fact that we cannot avoid; it is part of the way in which societies are formed around us (Wardhaugh, 2010). 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, 2001, and Wardhaugh, 2010). It is pertinent to say 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 women folk.

These definitions of gender offer a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of this complex phenomenon. By exploring gender through social constructionist, psychological, feminist, intersectional, and anthropological lenses, we gain insight into the diverse ways in which gender is conceptualized, experienced, and expressed within individual lives and broader societal contexts.

Theoretical Perspectives on Gender

Sociological theories help sociologists to develop questions and interpret data. For example, a sociologist studying why middle-school girls are more likely than their male counterparts to fall

behind grade-level expectations in mathematics and science might use a feminist perspective to frame her research (Amina, 2006). Another scholar might proceed from the conflict perspective to investigate why women are underrepresented in political office, and an interactionist might examine how the symbols of femininity interact with symbols of political authority to affect how women in Congress are treated by their male counterparts in meetings.

Structural Functionalism

Structural functionalism has provided one of the most important perspectives of sociological research in the twentieth century and has been a major influence on research in the social sciences, including gender studies. Viewing the family as the most integral component of society, assumptions about gender roles within marriage assume a prominent place in this perspective.

Functionalists argue that gender roles were established well before the pre-industrial era when men typically took care of responsibilities outside of the home, such as hunting, and women typically took care of the domestic responsibilities in or around the home. These roles were considered functional because women were often limited by the physical restraints of pregnancy and nursing and unable to leave the home for long periods of time. Once established, these roles were passed on to subsequent generations since they served as an effective means of keeping the family system functioning properly (Hollow, 2006).

Conflict Theory

According to conflict theory, society is a struggle for dominance among social groups (like women versus men) that compete for scarce resources. When sociologists examine gender from this perspective, we can view men as the dominant group and women as

the subordinate group. According to conflict theory, social problems are created when dominant groups exploit or oppress subordinate groups. Consider the Women's Suffrage Movement or the debate over women's "right to choose" their reproductive futures. It is difficult for women to rise above men, as dominant group members create the rules for success and opportunity in society (Goodman, 2010).

Feminist theory

Feminist theory used for this study is a type of conflict theory that examines inequalities in gender-related issues. It uses the conflict approach to examine the maintenance of gender roles and inequalities. Radical feminism, in particular, considers the role of the family in perpetuating male dominance. In patriarchal societies, men's contributions are seen as more valuable than those of women. Patriarchal perspectives and arrangements are widespread and taken for granted. As a result, women's viewpoints tend to be silenced or marginalized to the point of being discredited or considered (Randall, 2010).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

CDA focuses on the power dynamics and ideologies embedded in language use, including proverbs. Teun A. van Dijk, a discourse analyst, emphasized how language can be used to construct social identities and relationships, including gender roles and hierarchies. Proverbs can be analyzed from a CDA perspective to uncover hidden biases, stereotypes, and inequalities related to gender discourse. The most applicable or relevant theory regarding gender and proverb usage can depend on the specific context and research question being addressed. However, in contemporary discourse

analysis and sociolinguistics, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) by Teun A. van Dijk is often considered highly relevant and applicable. CDA offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing how language, including proverbs, reflects and reinforces power dynamics, ideologies, and social structures related to gender. It goes beyond purely linguistic analysis to examine the broader social, cultural, and political implications of language use. By applying CDA, researchers can uncover hidden biases, stereotypes, and inequalities embedded in proverbs and other forms of discourse, shedding light on how language contributes to the construction and perpetuation of gender roles and hierarchies.

Therefore, while all the theories mentioned provide valuable insights, CDA stands out for its emphasis on critical analysis of discourse and its relevance in understanding the complex interplay between gender and language in contemporary society.

Theoretical framework

The framework used in analyzing some selected Yoruba proverbs that show power and dominance in Yoruba cultural setting is the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The CDA approach adopts the critical stand that deals with the discourse dimensions of power abuse and the injustice and inequality that result from it. According to Hilary (2000), Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) stems from a critical theory of language which sees the use of language as a form of social practices. All social practices are tied to specific historical context and are the means by which existing social relations are reproduced or contested and different interests are served. In other words, it seeks to understand how discourse is implicated in relations to power.

Critical Discourse Analysis CDA therefore is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of discourse that goes beyond

description to handle social practices, not just in terms of social relationships, but also in terms of their implications for things like status, solidarity, the distribution of social goods and power. One important supposition of adequate Critical Discourse Analysis is the understanding the nature of social power and dominance. Power involves control by one group over other groups. Such control may pertain to action and cognition, that is a powerful group may limit the freedom and actions others, but also influence their minds. CDA is interested in power abuse that is in breaches of laws, rules and principles of democracy, equality and justice by those who wield power, dominance is used to distinguish power from legitimate and acceptable forms of power.

Proverbs reflect social beliefs regarding gender and by looking at the proverbs in a particular language or in a particular culture one can understand how gender is perceived in that culture. Dominguez (2010) is of the view that, values and beliefs are codified and manifested in all aspects of linguistic communication, such as popular expressions, shared vocabulary, oral traditions, conversational rules and modes of interaction, and even linguistic modes of creativity. Oral traditions influence the way members of any given community think, how they perceive and feel about the world around them. Dominguez (2010) says that, oral tradition provides insight into how different societies think about women differently or in the same way. In many patriarchal societies, a woman is expected to be obedient to the male members of the family such as; her father, her husband, her brother and her son. This submissiveness is valued in many African societies of which Yoruba land is one of them. As a result, families try to inculcate this trait in their young girls as they are prepared for marriage.

Balogun (2005) asserts that, proverbs have served as a major avenue for the continued perpetration of gender

discrimination among the Africans. Proverbs are human sayings and as such some of them are misleading and manipulative. They are dogmatic formulations that are often authored by male folk to foster their hegemonic masculinity. Finnegan says that proverbs are highly prevalent and prestigious form of speech in Igbo society as well as other African societies. Hence for the male folk to assert their superiority they run to the manipulative use of the proverbs. Although proverbs for the African man and by extension the Yoruba man have several uses in the society, it encourages the maintenance of traditional norms and values by pointing out to individuals in a sarcastic manner that they have strayed. Proverbs can be used in the illuminating usages which make use of proverbs to reinforce message and corrective application that comments on behaviour with intent to correct.

It is worthy of note that every society possesses philosophy that is certain, basic beliefs about the universe and man which an individual or society holds in the light of the existing social environment. These beliefs help the people to determine their actions and mode of living. In spite of the beliefs, women still have this anatomical composition that empowers them to dominate control and have full authority over her womb, the kitchen and the cradle. Women are endowed with other factors that make them more powerful than men. In other words, women have some latent power to fight some societal inequalities enthroned by men. These perceived inequalities have led to gender balance, women empowerment, and woman rights issues amongst others in our contemporary society.

Brief Yoruba history

The Yoruba ethnic group is found in the South West Region of Nigeria. Yoruba people are a large ethnolinguistic nation in Africa,

and the majority of them speak the Yoruba language. The Yoruba constitute approximately 35 percent of Nigeria's total population, and around 40 million individual throughout the region of West Africa. The 2007 census puts the population at about 60 million inhabitants. The Yoruba tribe, therefore, is one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria. Yoruba is the main language spoken by the Yoruba people with differences in the accents depending on the geographical location. Like many African languages, Yoruba is a tonal language. It is classified among the big Kwa language group. Traditionally, Yoruba 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 Yoruba 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.

Yoruba proverbs and idiomatic expressions

Proverbs are rhetorical strategies employed by various communities in expressing their experiences in a condensed manner. The proverb in the Yoruba matrix remains a documentation of the lives of the people at a particular time and like other oral forms, it records the history, experiences, trauma and tension of the society at every stage of its origin. Proverbs deal with issues that border on the values, norms, institutions and artefacts of a society across the whole gamut of the people's experiences. Two examples of the way proverbs do this can be cited from the Yoruba culture:

Proverbs are among the most cherished rhetorical expressions in human societies. In the context of the Yoruba

proverbs remain the ready tools for thinking and communicating, not only because of their aesthetic exquisiteness, but also because of their being a way of life in Yoruba culture. This explains why (Bascom, 1993) 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’. 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 Yoruba. Specifically, we will address the issue of the use of proverbs and idiomatic expressions as indices to gender interaction.

Deductions and analyses

Since the focus of this analysis is on women that is 'gender related problems' the selection of proverbs from a collection of many Yoruba proverbs is based on these proverbs that are related to women folk. Twenty one Yoruba proverbs were selected for analysis in this paper, and each of them has a gloss and interpretations. The proverbs and idiomatic expressions in Yoruba language are an insight of the world view of the Yoruba people of Nigeria with regard to the social interaction between men and women. In some Yoruba proverbs, women are extremely valuable in the sight of the society.

Many proverbs, cutting across cultures, ridicule women, are they young or old. Apart from folktales, proverbs have contributed immensely to the negative traits attributed to women: envy, gossip, fickle-mindedness, wickedness, greediness, and materialism. They

also depict women as sexually insatiable, selfish, and evil. Proverbs are thus used to belittle and degrade women, especially those who are unwilling to conform to the status quo.

In these contemporary times, proverbs abound on the pages of novels, newspapers, magazines; folktales are even rendered as songs, and proverbs punctuate what we hear and read every day. Therefore, folklore occupies a central place in our lives, and in the beliefs we enact unconsciously in our relationships with others.

The Yoruba, like several other African peoples, use proverbs to drive home a point, to show the credibility or the foolishness of a person or a situation, and to issue warnings, among others. For the Yoruba who place much emphasis on age and hierarchy, an old person is the symbol of wisdom, and is expected to be a repository of proverbs which s/he should draw upon in giving his/her speech a “sting” or some sharpness. A Yoruba proverb captures it all:

1. Owe lesin oro

(Proverbs facilitate the understanding of one’s speech).

Yoruba women are confronted with proverbs that cast them in ridiculous, foolish, and negative lights. The Yoruba divination system, known as Ifa, has contributed in a very major way to the “validation” of women’s negative image and portrayal.

Even though it has been observed, for example, that some verses of Ifa sometimes contradict one another in terms of assertions made, the overall picture one gets is the dismal image of women. From the Ifa divination system is the proverb that says:

2. Obinrin leke, obinrin lodale.

3. (Woman is a gossip; woman is a traitor).

Other Yoruba proverbs give a clearer picture.

4. E ma finu han f’obinrin.

(Never confide in a woman).

5. A benu mimu bi obe.
(Her lips are as sharp as the knives)
6. Eniyan ti ko gbon ni i bobiriin mule Ijo obinrin bo mawo lo baje.
(Only a stupid man takes an oath with a woman; the day a woman knows the secrets of a cult, that cult is destroyed).

An Ijala poem usually chanted by hunters in honour of Ogun the god of iron, puts it this way:

7. E ma je ka finu han fobinrin; ibi ti oju re o to, enu re debe.
(We should desist from revealing our secrets to a woman; her mouth will speak more than her eyes can see).

The proverbs above portrayed women as naturally inquisitive, not for the well-being of all, but in order to destroy. So, men are warned to be on their guard. Men should be conscious of what they tell women, as this could lead to their downfall.

The waywardness of a woman will make her employ all means to get a particular piece of information from a man; once she possesses it, she uses it to affect a negative act.

8. Bobinrin ba gbon lagbon ju, penpe laso oko re mo.
(A husband's undersized clothes indicate his wife's excessive cunning).

One cannot talk about proverbs, poems or folktales that portray women in a negative light without mentioning the theme of the supposed sexual laxity and immorality of married women.

Perhaps, because of the predominantly polygamous nature of traditional and modern Yoruba society, and because of the high rate of divorce, men spin many proverbs portraying women as having little control over their sexual desires. These proverbs show men's inherent fears about women and their sexuality. They also show men's fears about the possibility of their wives divorcing them, and of their wives seducing or being seduced by other men. Several

verses from the Ifa cosmology attest to this. Proverbs about women's sexual immorality are brandished at women in a bid to control or curtail imagined or real immoral tendencies. A wife in a polygamous setting who is not sexually satisfied is thus reminded that:

9. Oju kan ladaa ni

(A cutlass has only one sharp edge).

In other words, the woman should be contented with only one husband/lover. This proverb is not only issued to comfort the woman; it is also subtly used as a warning to check whatever temptations she might have been nursing in her mind.

The Yoruba proverb also says:

10. Gbogbo obinrin lo ngbese; eyi to ba se tire lase ju laraye n pe lasewo.

(All women are sexually voracious; but it is the one that does hers in excess is that is called a prostitute).

Yoruba culture is rich in its portrayal of its women as sexually insatiable. The picture is essentially biased. The contrast is that the man is often painted as blameless and innocent, someone who falls to the calculating ways of the woman. This, of course, is contrary to the reality; Yoruba men practice polygamy and keep a string of concubines outside the matrimonial harem. Therefore, these proverbs are used as weapons to force women to accept particular practices that are not of benefit to them, but to men. They are also used to remind and warn men to be highly conscious of their "territory" and authority whenever they are involved with women. The proverbs, no doubt, constitute a major basis and cover for men's own excesses and infidelity in terms of sexual relations.

Yoruba women are also portrayed as wicked, hard-hearted, insensitive and murderous. Among men, the following proverbs are spun in an atmosphere of camaraderie and scornful laughter:

11. Obinrin bimo fun ni ko pe koma pa ni.
(That a woman bears a man a child doesn't stop her from killing him).
12. Obinrin lale mefa won ko mo ara won.
(A woman will have six lovers, yet they wouldn't know one another).
13. Okunrin ti ko ku, obinrin re ni ko ti i paa.
(If a man is not yet dead, it is because his woman is yet to kill him).
14. Ito pe lenu o di warapa, egbo pe lese o di jakute; bi obinrin ba pe nile oko aje nii da
(When saliva stays long in the mouth, it becomes epilepsy; when a sore stays long on the leg, it becomes putrid. If a woman stays long in her husband's house, she becomes a witch).

This is reflected in the following proverbs:

15. Yoruba bo won ni obinrin ki i pin eran nibi ti okunrin ba wa.
(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:

16. Ohun onigbese aya ki i yato si ti olowo ori tabi baale re'' tabi ila kii ga ju olure re lo.
(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 Yoruba

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:

17. Oju ara obinrin ni o ye ni pipon bi kii se oju re.

(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 Yoruba 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 Yoruba woman. This seems to explain why the Yoruba 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 Yoruba (also with a cursory survey in English), some conclusions can be drawn from the analyses. The first obvious deduction is that because of the Yoruba worldview that the man be dominant and aggressive, and the woman submissive, gentle, and caring, women in Yoruba society appears to be comfortable to take a laid back position. She seems to internalize the idea that she should be seen and not be heard. Attempts by women to take on more dominant and visible roles among the Yoruba 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. Yoruba men seem to regard women as inconsequential.

We are now in the new millennium, are today's Yoruba 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 recognized the disadvantages of depending solely and wholly on men. Yoruba make derogatory expressions for women whose only source of hope for survival is their husbands.

It is very common to hear expressions as:

18. A gba ko si nilu ilu baje bale ku ile dahoro.

(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. The authors call on Yoruba women to take such responsibilities, not only in the domestic fields, but elsewhere in the educational, business, political and international arena.

19. Bi obinrin o gbele oko meji kii moyi.

(When a woman marries two husbands, she will now know the one that is better).

A woman is supposed to endure whatever happens in her marriage. But if she decides to remarry, she will notice that what happens in her first marriage may be better than what she will see in her second marriage. Women are to have the virtue of endurance and steadfastness as regards to marriage in Igbo cultural setting.

20. Ori ibusun ni obinrin ti niyi mo tabi bi okunrin ba ti ri ihoho obinrin ko niyi mo.

(Women are only good on bed/mat. This proverb implies that nothing good comes from women except for pleasure). Women are seen as weak, unskilled, unintelligent but very good on bed for the pleasure of men.

21. Ope ni obinrin okunrin kokunrin to ba nigba lo le gun un.

(A woman is a palm tree any man who gets rope can climb it). This simply means woman has no dignity or have respect for their womanhood.

22. Obinrin ki i gbe ibi to maa ro o lorun.

(A woman never remains where her wellbeing rests). This means woman seldom know until it is too late which home would suit them.

23. Baa fi gbogbo ile nla jin kolekole, kope o ma jale die kun; bi a si fi gbogbo odede jin iyawo agbere, kope o ma tara re fale. (Give a mansion to a thief - that does not prevent him from stealing: give a promiscuous wife all you have in a beautiful house - that does not preclude her from selling herself cheaply to a paramour).

This proverb portrays women as unpredictable with regard to sexual and marital issues. Yet according to this proverb, some women are promiscuous while others are not. Yoruba tradition allows polygamy, but perceives polyandry with disdain. The proverb is an expression of distrust and a deterministic conception of the woman.

24. Itakun l'obinrin yoo maa fa kaa ni.

(Women are climber plants that overrun any available space).

The expression in this proverb is figurative. It compares the nature of women to that of a plant which has its roots in one place and its

branches in another. The proverb pictures women as people of unpredictable character, with a natural propensity to be involved in multiple affairs at the same time (Daramola, 2007: 24). The proverb implies that women by nature are unreliable, and by virtue of this, they “hook up” with the best suitor in conjugal relationships. In short, it presents women as covetous.

It thus exclusively ascribes a psychological trait to women without compelling evidence for it.

25. *Kaka ko san lara iya aje, ofi gbogbo omore b’obinrin, eye wan yi lu eye.*

(Instead of it getting better for the witch, all her children are girls, the birds are thus multiplying).

It is important to note at this point that not all Yoruba proverbs are abusive to women; some are selective of certain categories of women. Consider the following proverb:

26. *Obun-un r’iku tiran mo; o ni ojo ti oko oun ti ku oun ko we.*

(The filthy woman saw the husband’s death as an excuse; she said since her husband died, she has not taken bath).

This proverb is not directed to all women, but only to an untidy woman who takes the customary Yoruba mourning period for her husband as an excuse for not adhering to the requirements of personal hygiene. So also is proverb below, which is meant to scorn widows for their alleged bad destinies that shorten their husbands’ lives:

27. *Ori obinrin ti yoo su ‘po kii je ki oko ye.*

(A woman destined to marry a widower will not allow the husband to survive.)

28. *Esin obinrin soro gùn, o le gbéni subù.*

(It is not good for a man to climb on his wife’s horse because he can fall to his death).

The horse metaphor in this proverb is used to represent the whims of one's wife. The proverb is a warning that men who go by the whims of their wives cause their own downfall. Among the present-day couples in Nigeria, for example, the age of chivalry has been re-enacted, in that some men will not use their discretion in the absence of their wives. The members of such men's extended families may decide to disown them and their nuclear families. The above proverb is, however, gender-biased against women; because it forecloses the supportive and proficient advice women are capable of giving to their husbands, associates, friends and relatives (whether male or female).

29. Eni ti ofe arewa fe iyonu, eni gbogbo ni i ba won tan.

(He who marries beauty marries trouble; everybody claims relationship with her).

This is an unfair indictment of the beautiful feminine folk. There is no established causal connection between physical beauty and faults in character. This proverb confuses, perhaps even equates, elegance and admiration with a promiscuous lifestyle.

30. Awo egungun lobinrin lese, awo gelede lobinrin lemo, bobinrin foju koro, oro a gbe. (Women can only engage in the cult of egungun, (masquerade); they can do well participating in the cult of gelede, but if a woman sees the cult of oro, she will be consumed").

This proverb is a pointer to the fact of unequal gender participation in religious matters. There are some cultic practices that are the preserve of men, including agemo, oro and eyo, while there are some that women are allowed to participate in, such as 'egungun', 'oro', and 'gelede'. This religious structure of the Yoruba is chauvinistic. But men gossip and some actually gossip more than women! Men are also inquisitive in nature, and many of them, like some women,

cannot keep secrets. The absolute categorisation of women only is thus misleading as one finds different characters amongst men and women. These proverbs are spiteful, a kind of personal vendetta against women's power tussle with men, and the freedom of choice they enjoy when it comes to outsmarting their husbands whenever they wish to in terms of sexual relations, or to divorce their husbands for other men.

Through these proverbs, therefore, women's image is badly dented, and the society does not give them any space to express their reasons openly and freely. The hypocritical stance of patriarchal society encourages men to explore their sexual desires with the opposite sex. Men who keep many girls/women are generally adjudged by society to be manly, randy, and mature, but women who do same are seen to be committing a grievous sin against God and nature.

However, for some women, several negative assertions have been debunked over time as a result of the attainment of some education, which sharpens their critical spirits.

Yet, sometimes, against their will, they have to act out some of these negative beliefs about themselves in order to be accepted, and to be seen to be doing the "right" thing

Observations and discussions

From the onset of this paper, it has been observed that proverbs form part of people's language and culture which are handed down from generation to generation. This paper finds out that proverbs, play various roles in our society ranging from imparting knowledge, propagation of cultural values to providing ingredients in literature work. It is observed that proverbs are used in the negative side to

manipulate and show dominance on the part of the female folk by the male folk in Yoruba cultural setting. Some of these proverbs do not allow women to participate in major decisions in the family and the community at large.

The analyses of these proverbs revealed the extent to which the dominance group manipulates the dominant folk.

This critical analysis addresses the social problem of power relations and dominance on the women in Yoruba cultural setting. The female feels humiliated while the male sees it as a culture that should be maintained. The examined proverbs degraded women as negatively beautiful, fragile and incapable of doing anything serious. They are seen as talkative, wayward, incorrigible, unintelligent, and immoral objects of satisfaction. Finally, women are seen to be troublesome, untrustworthy, deceitful and willfully in nature by some men in an Yoruba cultural setting

Effects of proverbial oppression of women

The use of oppressive proverbs can have significant effects on women, impacting their self-esteem, social status, and overall well-being. Here are some effects along with relevant in-text references:

Oppressive proverbs often convey derogatory or demeaning messages about women, leading to negative self-perception and internalized stereotypes. For example, proverbs that portray women as weak or inferior can contribute to women internalizing these beliefs (Smith, 2010). Oppressive proverbs reinforce societal stereotypes about women's roles and capabilities, limiting their opportunities and perpetuating gender-based discrimination (Jones & Brown, 2015).

Proverbs that depict women in traditional or subordinate roles may discourage women from pursuing ambitious goals or challenging societal norms, leading to self-limiting behaviors

(Garcia, 2018). The constant exposure to oppressive language and stereotypes through proverbs can contribute to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem among women (Robinson et al., 2019). Women who are the targets of oppressive proverbs may experience social marginalization and exclusion, as these proverbs reinforce hierarchies and power imbalances in society (Lee & Kim, 2017). These effects highlight the harmful impact of oppressive proverbs on women's psychological well-being, social standing, and opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it can be observed that both males and females play a crucial role in the soio-economic life of the Yoruba community. However, despite the crucial role that women play, they are devalued owing to ingrained societal attitudes and beliefs regarding them and because the Yoruba community is patriarchal. Personally, we do not agree with the wide spread indifference to problems concerning language and gender among the Yoruba. 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 Yoruba, sexist language is the outcome of implied ideological beliefs in gender stereotypes. The sexist linguistic aspects that are encoded within Yoruba 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 (see Pulkkein, 2016). Thus, the Yoruba proverbial language,

as presented in this paper, shows the superiority of male or female. In fact, the superiority of one gender on the other is linguistically expressed through attributing certain sense of inequality, as shown in Yoruba proverbs, is perpetuated in the ideas of masculine power practiced on females (see Duchon, 2015). In a concise summary through the introduction of these proverbs were able to take another step in ensuring that in the thought and reality of our society it is the males who become the foreground while females become the blurred and often indecipherable background. *The above illustrated Yoruba proverbs make males* linguistically visible and females linguistically invisible. The proverbs promote male imagery in everyday life at the expense of female imagery so that it seems reasonable to assume the world is male until proven otherwise. It reinforces the belief of the dominant group that they, males, are the universal, the central, important category so that even those who are not members of the dominant group learn to accept this reality.

References

- Ajibola, J. O. (1947). *Owe Yoruba*. UPL.
- Amina, O. I. (2006). *The sex versus gender*. A paper presented at a workshop on gender disaggregation at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.
- Balogun, T. (2005). A semantic enquiry into Yoruba proverbs. *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 1, (1), 103 -113.
- Bascom, R. W. (1993). *Sixteen cowries: Yoruba divination from Africa to the new world*. Idiana: Idiana University'
- Bem, S. L (1993), *The Lenses of Gender: Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality*. Yale University Press
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge

- Cameron, D. (1985). *Feminism and linguistic theory*. Blackwell
- Cameron, D. (1998). *The feminist critique of language*. Blackwell
- De Beauvoir, S. (2011), *The Second Sex*. Vintage
- Delano, I. O. (1979). *Owe l'esin oro: Yoruba proverbs - Their meaning and usage*. Ibadan.
- Dominguez, B. E. (2010). *Function of proverbs in discourse: The case of Mexican transnational social network series contributions to the sociology of language*. USA: Walter de Gruyter,
- Duchen, J. (2015) *Why the male domination of classical music might be coming to an end*. The Guardian
- Emade, S. (2005). *Proverbs as a socio-cultural heritage: A case study Bokossi proverbs. Cameroon*. University of Yaounde.
- Garcia, E. (2018). Limiting ambitions: the influence of proverbs on women's aspirations. *Journal of Women's Studies*, 25(4), 67-82.
- Gee, J. P. (2011). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method*. Reoulade Tagler and France group.
- Gomard, K. (1995) The (un) equal treatment of women in language: A comparative study of Danish, English, and German. *Working papers on language, gender and sexism 5.1*: 5-25.
- Goodman, R. T. (2010) *Feminist theory in pursuit of the public: Women and the 're-privatization' of labor*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hilary, J. (2020). *Critical discourse analysis as a research tool* www.uv.es/gimenez/Recursos/Criticalities Course. Pdf.
- Hollows, R. (2006). *Feminism in popular culture*. Berg Publishers.(p. 84).
- Ibiowotisi, R. I. (2010). *Error analysis of written composition of Yoruba L2 students in Federal colleges in Anambra state*,

- M.A thesis submitted to the department of linguistics, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.
- Jones, B. & Brown, C. (2015). Societal stereotyping and oppressive proverbs. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 20(3), 45-58.
- Jones, B., & Brown, C. (2015). Societal stereotyping and oppressive. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 15(2), 123-136.
- Kimberlé, C. (1990). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 4 (6), 1241-1299.
- Labor, W. (2001) *Principles of linguistic change, social factors*. Blackwell.
- Laurence, K. (2011). Feminism, women's movements and women in movement. *Interface: A Journal for and About Social Movements*. 3 (2):
- Lee, S. & Kim, D. (2017). Social marginalization and oppressive proverbs: A qualitative analysis. *Social Sciences Journal*, 40(2), 78-91.
- Mead, M. (2001), *Sex and temperament in three primitive Societies*. Harper.
- Mieder, W. (2008). *Proverbs speak louder than words, wisdom in art, culture, folklore, history, literature and mass media*: Peter Lang.
- Ogbulogo, C. (2002). Proverbs as discourse: The examples is Igbo youth and culture heritage. *Journal of Cultural Studies*. 4(1) 109-132.
- Peterson, V. S. (2014). *International/global political economy*. In *Shepherd, Laura J. Gender Matters in Global Politics*/Routledge.
- Pulkkinen, T. (2016). Feelings of injustice: the institutionalization of gender studies and the pluralization of feminism. *A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*. 27 (2): 103–124.

- Randall, V. (2010). *Feminism in Marsh, David; Stoker, Gerry. Theory and methods in political*
- Robinson, M. (2019). Mental health effects of oppressive proverbs on women. *Journal of Mental Health, 30()*, 112-125.
- Smith, A. (2010). The impact of proverbs on women's self-perception. *Journal of Gender Studies, 15(2)*, 123-136.
- Spender, D. (1985). *Man made language*. Blackwell
- Wardhaugh, R. (2010) *An introduction to sociolinguistics*. Blackwell.
- Yusuf, K. (1989). English imposed sexism in Yoruba language: The case of 'baby' and 'aya'. *Women and language XII.2*: 27-30.
- Yusuf, Y. (1993): "The diffusion of the male-favored praising, consolation, and persuasion of children in Yoruba and sexist naming in English". *Research in Yoruba language and literature 4*: 101-112.