

Gender Equality in Language for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

In December 2015, United Nation's 8 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) expired and were subsequently replaced by 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Goal number 5 of the SDGs was to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls by the year 2030. The UN laid down an action plan that would help achieve the SDGs. However, the UN action plan is silent about issues of language that cause gender inequality. Today, September 2018, it is three years since the SDGs were implemented. According to UN SDG reports of 2016, 2017 and 2018 (see UN 2016, 2017, 2018), Gender inequality still persists worldwide, thus depriving women and girls of their basic rights and opportunities. This paper examines differences in language use between the male and female gender and the effect on overall empowerment of women. It argues that issues of language use disadvantage women in their effort to achieve sociopolitical and economic parity with their male counterparts.

Key words: Gender, empowerment, development, equality

Introduction

In December 2015, United Nation's 8 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) expired and were subsequently replaced by 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Goal number 5 of the SDGs was to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls by the year 2030. The UN laid down an action plan that would help achieve the SDGs. However, the UN action plan is silent about issues of language that cause gender inequality. Today, September 2018, it is three years since the SDGs were implemented. According to UN SDG reports of 2016, 2017 and 2018 (see UN 2016, 2017, 2018), Gender inequality still persists worldwide, thus depriving women and girls of their basic rights and opportunities. The reports suggest that achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls will require more vigorous efforts, including legal frameworks, to counter deeply rooted gender-based discrimination often resulting from patriarchal attitudes and

related social norms. The reports still do not talk about linguistic gender differences and their role in enhancing gender inequality.

Arguments about linguistic differences between males and females initially revolved around grammatical rules, such as morphological differences. But in the 1960s women researchers began to investigate how linguistic differences affect male communication. Feminist movements in the 1960s realized that language was a prominent tool of female oppression by the male gender. It was observed that language was an instrument of enhancing societal patriarchal systems apart from enhancing male supremacy over their female counterparts. From the 1970s, many studies began to focus on differences between male and female languages (see Lakoff, 1973, 1975; Kramer, 1974; Thorne, 1975; Fishman, 1978, 1980, 1983; Spender, 1980; Mulac et al, 1986; Coates, 1989, 1993, 1996, 2003; Tong, 1992). Many of the studies showed that traditional patterns of male dominance were evident in face-to-face conversations (see Danet, 1998; Graddol and Swann, 1989). Due to this dominance, women were disadvantaged in power relations.

Differences in Gender Language and Effect on Women Empowerment

The male and female gender differ in language use in different ways. In the following section, we discuss ways through which men and women differ in language use and the disadvantaged position of women due to the nature of their use of language.

Length of sentences

There is gender difference with regard to length of sentences deployed by men and women in their speeches. Women tend to use long sentences whereas men use short sentences (Gu, 2013). These differences come as a result of cultural issues where women are blamed or punished for mistakes arising from instructions that they give to their children and other family members. As a result, the female gender is forced to use long sentences that are semantically clear and laden with message. This calls for carefulness in speech which makes women to take extra caution in their speeches. This carefulness affects decision making at domestic level. It makes women to depend on men in decision making thus significantly reducing their power and influence at the domestic level.

The questioning method of speech

The length of sentences has an overall effect on other aspects of language use. For example, the desire to achieve clarity in speech leads to use of many questions. In his research, Robin (1975) found out that women turn declarative statements into questions thus reducing the power of their statements. Women therefore, have many questions in their communication. This is meant to seek the contribution of other people especially their family members in their decision

making so as to avoid mistakes that may lead to punishment. The tendency to adopt the questioning method in speech makes women to be dependent on the male gender in decision making. This weakens their overall bargaining power in political, social and economic circles.

Choice of topic

Topics discussed by men differ substantially with those discussed by women. Issues of taboos have affected topic choice with regard to gender. African societies have culturally defined jobs to be done by men and those for women. This has gone ahead to define and shape topics of discussion by men and those of women. In many Kenyan communities, there is still definition of men's jobs and those of women. As a result, women are advised to go for particular training in higher institutions of learning. They will be advised to for nursing, teaching and to some extent, law. Whereas men will be advised to go for aviation engineering, medicine, architecture. Our domestic duties have also, culturally, been defined along gender lines. Men are taught right from tender age that many domestic duties are feminine. Girls are made to believe right from childhood that domestic duties are meant for them. As a result, topics of discussion by men and women differ. Differences in topics of discussion affect women empowerment due to spillover effect where many women are reluctant to discuss politics and economic issues. It has made many women to believe that issues of economic investment are masculine duties.

Standard forms of language

Studies have shown that there is gender difference in language use with regard to grammar (see Nordberg, 1971; Trudgill, 1972, 1983; Gu, 2013; Romane, 2003). Studies by these scholars show that women have a tendency to use grammatically correct sentences compared to their male counterparts. This means that it is more likely for a man to deploy an ungrammatical sentence than a woman. The difference in grammar comes as a result of the desire for prestige (James, 1996) and as a reflection of their powerlessness (Trudgill, 1983; Romane, 2003). It is also true that African contexts like Kenya, female speakers are ridiculed more than their male counterparts when they break rules of grammar in speech. This leads to their endeavour to use more of the standard form. With regard to grammar, women are greatly disadvantaged due to the fact that they are punished more when they break grammatical rules than their male counterparts. Women are more ridiculed and shamed when they break rules of grammar or use words incorrectly. As a result, women tend to avoid speaking in public especially with regard to the use of English, if they have linguistic shortcomings. This in return affects their power and positioning in the society.

Assertiveness of speech

Women's speeches tend to be less assertive than those of men. Lakoff (1975) argues that the difference in assertiveness in gender language is seen in the way women use more apologies, more direct quotations, requests, avoid coarse language and speak less. They also tend to use more imperatives (Why do you...) and more qualifiers (I think that...pp 45). Cameron (2003) also shares these views when he argues that on average, women speak less than men.

Taboo Words and Euphemism

All communities define their use of language and impose sanctions on the use of some category of words which are viewed to be dirty and unfit for public use. Such words are only used in particular contexts and are rarely used outside these defined contexts. As a result, euphemistic words emerge to fill the void left by the sanctioned words. Levels of taboo language in male and female speeches differ. Men violate taboo language rules more frequently than women. Women who use taboo words are rebuked as opposed to their male counterparts who in most cases walk away with it. The fact that women are rarely forgiven when they use taboo words makes them careful in their choice of words during speech. Additionally, many of them shun topics that would lead them in to use of taboo words. This has an effect on their empowerment in terms of choice of topics to be discussed and their involvement in various discourses. It also makes them to keep silent even when issues that affect them are being discussed.

Politeness

Politeness is a feature of women's language. Women are, as a norm, required to be polite and shun violence and violent language. Men on their part are required to exhibit strength which should also be evident in their language. Women who show strength are said to have men's behavior and are often described as men. The issue of politeness in language and communication affects women empowerment. Political empowerment especially with regard to Kenyan and African politics is tricky for women. This is due to the linguistic norm of politeness as a societal requirement for feminine language. African political campaigns are rough and rough language deployed by men requires marching rough language from female counterparts. This has made many women to shun politics therefore affecting their political empowerment.

Humour in conversations

Gender differences in communication are evident in humour in conversations (Lakoff, 1975). Lakoff argues that language used by people of the female gender lacks humour and many times, female speakers do not know how to deliver humour in their speeches. Humour is an important element of face to face conversations. Humour makes listeners listen more to speakers and lack of it in a

long conversation may affect attention of listeners. Lack of humour in women's conversations makes their male counterparts to have advantage in issues such as politics and general power. It also disadvantages them in issues such as academic discourses.

Interruption of rules of turn taking

There is difference between men and women with regard to turn taking and rules governing conversations. Scholars now agree that men do interrupt conversations more than women (see Zimmerman and West, 1975; Fishman, 1980 and Tannen, 1984). In their research, Zimmerman and West found out that women interrupt conversations less times than men. Tannen posits that men break turn taking rules and speech more regularly due to their realization that speech is a source of status and that one can use speech to realize high class status and to prevent others from controlling them. She argues that men see the world as a place to try to gain status and try to control it. Due to this, they struggle to control conversations as opposed to women who use conversations as a way to gain support for their ideas, appreciation and affection. Men's effort to control conversations gives them more power in sociopolitical and economic negotiations. It also gives them more power in academic discourses thus gaining advantage over their female counterparts.

Conclusion

There is a difference in language use between the male and female gender. The difference in language comes as a result of men's desire to control women. In this paper, it emerged that women use long sentences, employ more silence during public discourse, use more gramatic sentences and shun taboo or dirty language. These differences in language use show that the female gender's language use puts it in a disadvantaged position as compared to their male counterparts. As a consequence, this affects their overall economic and political power.

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