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Gender and Language in Sub-Saharan Africa

Tradition, struggle and change

EDITED BY

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Volume 33

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We dedicate this collection to the children of the contributors:

Anna, Bakani, Chawada, Davina, Emily, Jade, Joanna, John,
Joshua M., Joshua R., Karabo, Katlego, Kofi, Koki, Kwame, Kyalo,
Maja, Melina, Mbuya, Muli, Mwende, Mwendwa, Percy,
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Gender and language in sub-Saharan Africa

A valid epistemology?

Lilian Lem Atanga, Sibonile Edith Ellece, Lia Litosseliti
and Jane Sunderland

Gender is not a straightforward concept to research and write about, not least because it is so wide-ranging. In terms of language *use* – which is what this collection is concerned with – *gender* pertains to both talk and written text. Conceptually, we can talk about gender relations, gender identities and gendered practices, always remembering that gender and sexuality are closely related. And while the term *gender* is often used in relation to the social construction of female and male *people*, it may be more useful to see gender as a set of *ideas*, i.e. what is thought, said and written about women, men, girls and boys: what they are like and do, what they should be like and should do. These ideas are often expressed through gendered discourses.

Such ideas are, of course, highly contingent: they vary with context. The broad geographical context in question here is sub-Saharan Africa, although this consists of a huge diversity of smaller, shifting contexts and Communities of Practice. Sub-Saharan Africa is an important epistemological site for the study of language and gender: while gender is relevant across the globe, empirical studies of gender and language have to date been carried out largely in the USA, Canada, Australasia and Europe, the 'global North'. While this imbalance is changing, but published sociolinguistic and discourse analytical work on gender and language in relation to African contexts remains scarce and scattered. It is, however, by no means non-existent, as contributions to seminars on the topic (see below) and our 'Gender, sexuality and language in African contexts' Bibliography (pp. 317–325) show. Internationally-published contributions to the gender, language and sexuality field include those from South Africa (Elizabeth de Kadt 2002, 2004; Puleng Hanong Thetela 2002 and William Leap 2008), Botswana (Sibonile Edith Ellece 2011, 2012), Cameroon (Lilian Lem Atanga 2012), Rwanda (Alexandre Kimenyi 1992) and Morocco (Fatima Sadiqi 2003a, b); see also Oyewumi (1997) and Steady (1996), whose concern with gender politics in Africa is partly informed

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by language. Further, there are important PhD theses on gender and language in African contexts by African scholars (for example, Catherine Kitetu 1998; Sarah Ogbay 1999; Felicia Yieke 2002). However, the work of many such scholars often does not achieve international distribution. This is in part because those African scholars working in Africa (and not all are) often *need* to publish in national or even institutional journals, given that publication of some sort is needed for promotion or sometimes job retention. Many African Universities also lack resources to support research, and do not have the benefit of national funding bodies, hence have to rely on ('Western'[1]) bodies, many of which however restrict funding to citizens of the same country as the funding body. The British Academy International Partnerships and Mobility scheme is very welcome but is extremely competitive.[2] For a relevant (but gender-blind article) see Holm (2010); for more observations on this, and on gender scholarship in Africa in particular, see Mama (2007).

Further, the lack of British/American English for most African scholars means that these scholars, like others for whom English is not an L1, often find themselves on the periphery of internationally established academic enterprise, where, inter alia, publication and other activities are conducted overwhelmingly in British/American English (see Flowerdew 2007 for a good discussion in this area). This does not mean that 'African work'[3] written in English to reach scholars who work in the field elsewhere does not need to be complemented in Africa by the valuing of research and publication in local languages. More generally, the dominance of 'Western' scholarship in African Studies is well documented (see Prah 1998, 2010), and accordingly, as Makoni and Meinhof (2004: 77) observe, 'much of our systematic knowledge of African societies is derived from and continues to be produced by western sources', where 'western sources' constitute a particularly broad 'grand narrative'. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff start their recent *Theory from the South, or, How Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa* (2012) with:

> Western enlightenment thought has, from the first, posited itself as the wellspring of universal learning … concomitantly, it has regarded the non-West … primarily as a place of parochial wisdom, or antiquarian tradition, of exotic ways and means. Above all, of unprocessed data. (p. 1)

1. We use the problematic label 'Western' here for reasons of brevity, and refer the reader to the many critical discussions of such labels and the construction of 'otherness' – most notably Said 1978.

2. <http://www.britac.ac.uk/funding/guide/intl/International_Partnership_and_Mobility.cfm> (27 March 2012).

3. We acknowledge that the term 'African work' is problematic (see also Nyamnjoh 2004).

This provides a salutary reminder: while Africa in one sense provides 'unprocessed data' aplenty, for the field of gender and language and beyond, the Comaroffs' point is that 'unprocessed data' from the 'non-West' can alternatively be conceptualised as 'sources of refined knowledge', rather than something akin to those raw materials which have been capitalised on, prior to refinement and value-adding. They then ask:

> … what if … we invert that order of things? What if we subvert the epistemological scaffolding on which it is erected? What if we posit that, in the present moment, it is the global south that affords privileged insight into the workings of the world at large? (2012: 1)

This question anticipates the Comaroffs' first thesis that, 'in the history of the present, the global south is running ahead of the global north, a hyperbolic prefiguration of its future-in-the-making' (2012: 19). While their thesis may be more relevant to economics, notions of nationhood and large-P politics than to gender, in this volume we still can ask how *gendered* social and linguistic processes in Africa can inform our understanding of such processes worldwide. This is also to draw on the Comaroffs' second thesis, i.e. that modernity in Africa, i.e. 'Afromodernity', 'exists *sui generis*, not as a derivative of the Euro-original' (2012: 19). As the chapters in this collection show, many dimensions of Afromodernity are highly gendered. And while we do not wish to simply replace one 'grand narrative' with another (the non-West rather than the West as the wellspring of learning), we fully acknowledge that different *and diverse* African epistemologies can inform and shed light on the workings of the world at large, and perhaps in particular on those workings in the 'West', not least by helping those of us who are from the normativising 'West' to (borrowing a phrase from ethnography) 'make the familiar strange'.

One reason for a project entitled 'Gender and language in sub-Saharan Africa' is to ensure the work of African scholars on gender and language topics rooted in or related to Africa reaches the international community, enabling international engagement with it. This is to promote the development of the gender and language field as a whole, which needs to learn from as great a diversity of contexts as possible – not only in terms of new, interesting 'unprocessed data' or 'sources of refined knowledge' and different manifestations of gender (femininity, masculinity, gender relations, as well as sexuality, and representations of all these) in different contexts and Communities of Practice (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992, 1999), but also to develop enriched understandings of gender and gender-language relationships, sexuality and sexuality-language relationships, and identify different interests, priorities and interpretations in our research agenda. To this end, between 2008 and 2010 we organised a sequence of five seminars with the title of 'Language

and Gender in African Contexts': in Leeds (UK), Gaborone (Botswana), London (UK), Dschang (Cameroon) and Ile Ife (Nigeria). One objective of this seminar series, as of this collection, was to tease out some of the discourses on gender that characterise gender and language study in African contexts.

Of course, as Africa is so rich in languages and dialects, the workings of grammatical gender can be explored in each of these 'codes' (and have been in many, see e.g. Comrie 1999; Corbett 2004; Katamba 2006). Gender and language study would be foolish to ignore this established *descriptive* dimension of the field. A given 'code' may have clear gender implications (see, for example, Corbett and Mtenje 1987). It is also always worth looking at the linguistic resources available in a given language, for instance, overlexicalisation and lexical omissions. In isiZulu (for example), spoken mainly in the KwaZulu Natal province of South Africa, but also in many metropolitan South African cities, sexually active boys may be called *amasoka* (i.e. 'men highly favoured by girls') – but sexually-active girls are referred to extremely derogatorily as *unondindwa* ('a woman with multiple sexual partners'); *isifebe* ('a loose woman', a near synonym of *unondindwa*); and/or *isikhebeleshe* (which has a similar meaning). Notably, this phenomenon is echoed globally in use of other languages (see e.g. Cowie and Lees 1981). In several African languages, for example Kinyarwanda (Rwanda), and Setswana and Ikalanga (Botswana), it is grammatically impossible for a woman to say, as did Jane Eyre of Mr Rochester, in English, 'Reader, I married him', since the verb *marry* cannot take a feminine subject (Kimenyi 1992; Ellece 2007). This reflects and, arguably, maintains and helps construct traditional social practices surrounding the marriage institution.

However, applied sociolinguistic and discourse analytical studies of gender and language are also important in order to explore actual language in use, in different African contexts (see below). Some excellent sociolinguistic work looks at gender (actually, biological sex) as a *variable* (e.g. Mesthrie 2010), but this is to see language primarily as reflecting rather than constructing gender, an older paradigm of the gender and language field. In terms of the construction of gender and indeed identity, it is instructive to see how aspects of linguistic code such as the above are *used*: are these apparent constraints circumvented in some way, for example? If we can see language change here, is this related or in possible response to women's (and men's) struggles, in terms of social and material practices?

The 'code/use' distinction (broadly corresponding to Ferdinand de Saussure's *langue/parole*) can also be exemplified in proverbs. African languages are rich in traditional proverbs about gender (see e.g. Yusuf 1995; Schipper 2003; Yusuf and Mathangwane 2003; Arua and Yusuf 2010); many such proverbs (unlike English equivalents) are well-known and in current use. In the sense that they are fixed and formulaic, they can be seen as an aspect of *code*. Largely derogatory when they

refer to women, proverbs are accordingly a predominant topic in African work on gender and language. However, how proverbs are *used*, e.g. in what context, for what purpose, by whom; whether they are used conservatively or progressively/ subversively, or are even contested, and whether there are now new, more progressive proverbs in circulation,[4] in response to struggle and change, is another thing entirely, and this represents an important and fruitful future research direction.

Africa: A special continent?

It is important to ask whether Africa may (currently) be a special continent, in some way, in terms of gender and language issues, and indeed whether a focus on Africa is a form of post-colonial marginalisation (why not position it as part of and/or integrate it firmly into the mainstream of 'gender and language study proper'?), or of essentialism (does this focus suggest that gendered language use or linguistic resources in Africa are somehow constituted by unique, unchanging phenomena?).

In the course of the 'Gender and Language in sub-Saharan Africa' project, we have had to grapple not only with the self-evident fact that 'African contexts' are many and diverse, but also that 'context' exists on many levels. The *geographical* notion of context requires us to consider not only the continent as a whole, and sub-Saharan Africa *vis á vis* the Maghreb (for example), but also individual countries, regions, ethnic groupings (many of which cross national boundaries), cities, towns, villages, settlements, settings (such as courts and markets), Communities of Practice (such as family compounds, workplaces and football teams), and indeed African diasporic contexts across the globe. While acknowledging the importance of such 'locatedness', it is also important to identify links between any social phenomenon characteristic of a given social context and phenomena characteristic of *other* contexts – including 'non-African' ones – in which there may be echoes, faint or otherwise, of those very characteristics (as with the example of derogatory words used for sexually active women, above). We refer to 'characteristics' rather than 'defining features' because it is important not to essentialise or try to 'fix' what happens within a given geographical context: there will always be diversity within that context, and tendencies rather than absolutes, and, in a globalised world, social practices will be in a continual state of flux, markedly or less markedly so.

Yet the notion of 'context' extends beyond space and place. In a discussion of the discourse-historical approach to Critical Discourse Analysis, for example,

4. A radical feminist example of a new proverb in English is 'A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle'.

Ruth Wodak (2008) identifies a range of contextual features potentially relevant to any occurrence of language use, including the broad socio-political context, the historical context, and features of the narrow social context associated with the language users in question. As regards an actual speech event or written text, contextual considerations include genre, topic, the immediate co-text, multimodality, and a range of intertextual and interdiscursive links. Any proper exploration of language use, we would agree, needs to take these different levels and dimensions of context on board.

Let us start with what might, broadly and provisionally, 'characterise' sub-Saharan Africa (an exercise that might be undertaken for any continent). In comparison with what characterises many Western countries, the list would start with post-colonialism[5], and past and present 'north-south' relationships. To generalise, it might then also include the following: strong family networks, respect for the elderly, the need of most families for economic independence in the absence of government assistance, stark contrasts between the modern and the traditional, high levels of multi-ethnicity and of religiosity, changing family structures because of high HIV/AIDS rates, a concern with social hierarchy, and low wages and salaries (but also a fast growing economy and relatively low cost of living). Linguistically, it would include a high degree of multilingualism (with the role and importance of English and French varying across the continent), cultures of orality and less-than-100% literacy rates. To these lists we can add marked gender differentiation in much social life, especially public life.

We concur with the many criticisms of constructions of Africa as a monolithic entity and, as indicated, in our own concern *not* to essentialise Africa, do not wish to perpetuate any dichotomies between the West and the 'rest'. Following Mudimbe (1994), Mekgwe (2010) makes precisely the point that we need to move beyond 'Africa' to a 'post-Africa' characterised by diversity, if we are to begin demystifying the 'Africa vs. the West' divide. However, we *also* argue that we need to talk about those social characteristics that sub-Saharan African countries tend to share, as these are likely to inform choices of topics of research into gender and language in sub-Saharan African contexts.

This is not to reinvent the language and gender field for Africa. 'Classic' topics (e.g. gender in relation to the language and discourse of the media, advertisements, institutions – courts, workplaces, classrooms – private talk), as well as sexist language/discourse and language change, are as relevant to Africa – and hence can and should be explored in Africa – as anywhere else. At our five seminars on this project (three of which were held in Africa, with almost all contributions by

5. We recognize that 'Western' countries can be described as 'post-colonial' too, in reference to their role as ex-colonizers, but this is to use the term with a very different inflection.

Africans), many of the topics addressed were what might be described as 'universal' ones, several from the above sub-fields. Topics which might be described as characteristically 'African' included those associated with orature, such as proverbs. Another predominant focus, particularly at the Ile Ife conference, was gender and the language of literature (perhaps because of the rich tradition of novels and other fiction by Nigerian writers). Two other Nigerian foci were (a) the concern with titles (honorifics), interesting in the light of progressive educational change for (a small subsection of) African women, which has meant that many now hold doctorates – but are also married, a legal and social status which is highly valued, but especially for women (see Mustapha, this volume), and (b) use of the 'singular they' (as opposed to 'generic' *he* or phrasings such as *he or she*), unmarked in the talk of native speakers of English, but which holds particular relevance for a country such as Nigeria in which English is a very important 'second language' (and where some see 'Nigerian English' as their first language).

What about theoretical approaches to the field? It can be argued that the various *deficit/dominance/difference* approaches (now dated) to the analysis and interpretation of gender and language data consisting of naturally-occurring talk, and the more recent, broader *discourse* approaches (see e.g. Sunderland 2004; Litosseliti 2006; Talbot 2010), are no more and no less appropriate to African work than work elsewhere. Certainly it would seem fruitless – politically as well as intellectually – to retheorise the field for Africa.

However, two important points need making. Modern gender and language study was galvanised in the early 1970s by the advent of the second wave of the 'Western' Women's Movement,[6] and has ever since been informed and underpinned by developments in 'Western' feminism. Secondly, the situation of many 'Western' women is now vastly improved, in terms of gender equality, equal opportunities, and relevant legislation, and as a result we have 'new' considerations: Michelle Lazar (2005) talks about 'subtle sexism', and Sara Mills (2008, 2004) about 'indirect sexism' and 'third wave feminism' (see also Mills and Mullany 2011). Yet 'Western' feminism (or at least interpretations of it) remains unpalatable in many African contexts (see below, and Lilian Lem Atanga's final chapter in this collection), *and*, simultaneously, sexism in many African contexts remains far from subtle or indirect. To what extent, therefore, can a 'Western' feminism-informed gender and language study underlie the developing study of gender and language in sub-Saharan Africa?

As a more linguistic illustration of the problematic value of one such 'Western' epistemology, let us return to the '(male) dominance'/'(cultural) difference'

6. The 'first wave' refers to the struggle for women's suffrage, in the early 20th century.

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