

## THE INTERPLAY OF LANGUAGE USE, GENDER VARIATION AND SOCIETAL PERCEPTION

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### **Abstract**

Although considerable scholarly efforts have been made to promote gender sensitivity, equality, and inclusive representation, there remains a critical need to engage with the complex and multifaceted issues of human behaviour, particularly within the Nigerian context. This study investigates the interplay between language use, gender variation, and societal perceptions through a discourse analysis of how language reflects and shapes cultural views on gender. Historically, language has not only mirrored societal norms but also contributed to the marginalisation and underrepresentation of women, thereby influencing their self-perception and public image. Given the dynamic nature of language as a social construct and its evolving role in shaping attitudes, this study emphasises the need for a more inclusive discourse on gender. It specifically examines gender-based language variation and its relation to societal perceptions. The objective is to advocate for a transformation in how women are perceived by challenging and reformulating prevailing linguistic and social norms. The study adopts a discussion-based research method, reviewing findings from existing literature and integrating them into the present analysis. It draws upon the concept of linguistic idealism as proposed by Rorty (1979). Among its findings, the study reveals that the assumption that lexical choices are inherently gendered is flawed; rather, words and expressions are neutral and can be deployed flexibly based on individual linguistic choices. Furthermore, the traditional belief in female inferiority exacerbates misconceptions about women within society. The study argues that perceived differences in gender roles and identities as well as the dominance of males contribute significantly to divergent patterns in language use. The study concludes by advocating for a gender-neutral linguistic environment and a shift in societal perceptions regarding gender and language.

**Key words:** Language use, gender variation, societal perception, traditional norms, Idealism and gender-free environment.

### **Introduction**

This study investigates the role of language in shaping and reflecting societal perceptions and norms relating to gender. Specifically, it explores how linguistic features may either perpetuate stereotypes or contribute to progress towards gender equality. The analysis is anchored in the philosophical framework of idealism, which posits that reality is socially constructed and mediated through communication (Rorty, 1979). As Schelling, cited in Heath (1978), suggests, human consciousness influences how individuals perceive the world, and these perceptions are shaped significantly by language.

Rorty (1979) further argues that language is not a neutral medium but an active agent in constituting social experience and identity including gender norms. Gender, as distinct from biological sex, is understood here as a socially constructed system of roles, behaviours, and expectations that a society considers appropriate for men and women. Bucholtz and Hall (2016) emphasise that language both reflects and reinforces gender distinctions. The shift from gender-specific occupational terms (e.g., hostess, waitress) to gender-neutral alternatives (e.g., host, server) is indicative of an evolving linguistic response to gender inclusivity.

Language variation refers to differences in

form, position, and function that may emerge in different contexts or among different social groups. Sil (2015) defines variation in linguistic terms as differences in phonetics, grammar, and lexical choices that are influenced by social structures. Societal perceptions often impose gendered assumptions on language use, associating certain expressions or vocabulary with male or female speakers. Such perceptions often stem from traditional views that women are inferior to men a notion that constrains women's use of language and limits their participation in public discourse. In contrast, contemporary movements for gender equity have empowered women to assert their voices and identities, including through language. This study therefore seeks to investigate how language use reflects gender variation and how societal perceptions influence such usage, with the aim of advocating for a more inclusive and egalitarian linguistic environment.

### **Literature Review**

The literature review is organised into three thematic areas: language use, gender variation, and societal perception.

### **Language Use**

Language is commonly defined as a system of communication that allows humans to express ideas and relate to one another. It plays a crucial role in social organisation, enabling individuals to assert identity, negotiate meaning, and influence behaviour (Bucholtz & Hall, 2016). As such, language is not merely descriptive but also performative and ideologically loaded. Lakoff (2004) observes that women's linguistic style often reflects their subordinate social position, characterised by politeness strategies, hesitancy, and stylistic softness. For instance, women's language is said to rely heavily on hedges and qualifiers such as I think, perhaps, and sort of, indicating a reluctance to assert authority. Furthermore, lexical preferences such as oh dear! and adorable are seen as more typical of women's speech, in contrast to stronger, expletive-laden language (e.g., shit) more commonly associated with men (Spender, 1998).

These stylistic differences also extend to word formation. The suffix -ess (as in actress or

hostess) marks feminine versions of occupational titles. However, contemporary discourse increasingly avoids such distinctions in favour of neutral alternatives like actor or host. As Bucholtz and Hall (2016) argue, this shift reflects growing awareness of the exclusionary nature of gendered language and supports more equitable practices in naming and referencing. This study builds on these insights by evaluating the sociolinguistic implications of language use in relation to gender.

### **Gender Variation**

Gender is widely understood as a social construct encompassing the attributes, behaviours, and roles culturally associated with masculinity and femininity. Rubin (1995) argues that gender is not inherently linked to biological sex but is instead produced and maintained through social processes, including language use. The variation in language use between genders is closely tied to socio-cultural dynamics that reflect broader inequalities. According to Rubin (1995), these variations manifest in phonological, grammatical, and lexical patterns. For instance, women are more likely to use intensifiers, emotion-laden adjectives (e.g., charming, beautiful), and tag questions (e.g., isn't it?), which function to seek affirmation rather than assert dominance.

By contrast, men's language is often characterised by directness, command, and assertiveness. Kramer (1997) and Uchida (1992) argue that both socialisation and biological factors contribute to these differences. Boys and girls are socialised differently, leading to divergent communicative practices that reinforce gender roles. Mortad (2013) contends that women tend to adopt standard grammatical forms and more prestigious language than men. Women are often viewed as more talkative or emotionally expressive, and this stereotype has led to the perception that women dominate conversations despite evidence that men interrupt more frequently as a way to assert control (Spender, 1998).

Romaine (1998) further argues that while women use language to foster solidarity and inclusivity, men use it to display authority and maintain social dominance. These variations reflect the social encoding of gender roles rather

than any inherent linguistic divide. From a linguistic standpoint, words are not gendered; they acquire connotations based on social conditioning. Thus, the belief that some expressions are exclusive to either males or females is unfounded. Societal perceptions of gender also influence opportunities and privileges. While women are often portrayed as more emotionally expressive and less suited to assertive roles, contemporary society is increasingly challenging these views. In some contexts, women are even perceived as beneficiaries of special protections and affirmative opportunities. Yet, these dynamics can marginalise men in subtle ways, especially where responsibility and expectations are unequally distributed.

### **Societal Perceptions**

The relationship between gender and societal perception is complex and multifaceted, encompassing a range of interrelated constructs such as gender roles, gender relations, gender perceptions, and gender stereotypes. These constructs collectively shape the ways individuals are understood, evaluated, and positioned within their social environments, significantly influencing linguistic practices and access to discursive authority (Bem, 1993; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Gender roles are among the most visible expressions of societal perception. They refer to the socially constructed norms that assign behaviours, responsibilities, and modes of appearance to individuals based on their perceived gender. These roles are historically and culturally contingent, embedded within institutional and cultural frameworks, and often reinforce binary notions of masculinity and femininity. As a result, gender roles frequently constrain the expressive, intellectual, and occupational possibilities available to individuals, particularly women, by associating competence, emotional control, and authority with men, while assigning care, domesticity, and deference to women (UNESCO, 2021).

Closely related to gender roles are gender relations, which concern the distribution of power, status, and responsibilities between men and women within social contexts. In many societies, these relations are characterised by asymmetry,

with men disproportionately occupying dominant positions in political, economic, and linguistic domains. This structural imbalance affects not only access to material and symbolic resources but also influences the capacity of women to assert themselves in discursive and decision-making spaces. The perpetuation of such inequities often reinforces the marginalisation of women and normalises male authority (Connell & Pearse, 2022). Gender perceptions also play a critical role in shaping societal attitudes towards gendered identities. These perceptions are not biologically determined but are socially learned and reinforced through repeated exposure to normative discourses and institutional practices. They inform how individuals assess the legitimacy, competence, and desirability of certain roles for men and women. For instance, women are often perceived as less suited to leadership positions, a bias that may be internalised and manifested in reduced self-efficacy or limited ambition. Such perceptions sustain gender hierarchies and hinder the development of inclusive and equitable societies (Nguyen et al., 2023).

Furthermore, gender stereotypes constitute a major mechanism through which societal perceptions are maintained. These are generalised and often reductive beliefs about the traits and behaviours that are supposedly typical of men and women. For example, men are expected to be assertive, rational, and emotionally restrained, while women are expected to be nurturing, empathetic, and deferential. These stereotypes not only limit individual self-expression but also justify unequal treatment and reinforce marginalisation, particularly in professional, educational, and political domains (UN Women, 2022). The effects of these societal perceptions are not limited to women alone. Men who deviate from socially sanctioned notions of masculinity may experience stigmatisation, emotional suppression, or exclusion. In some cases, this repression manifests in behavioural extremes such as drug abuse, criminal violence, or involvement in cultism and terrorism. Increasingly, however, women are also engaging in these socially deviant behaviours, driven by structural disadvantage, peer influence, poverty,

and the breakdown of traditional family and communal structures (Akinbode, 2021). These patterns highlight the urgent need to critically interrogate and transform societal perceptions of gender in order to foster inclusive linguistic and social environments.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study is grounded in the philosophical tradition of Idealism, particularly as articulated by Richard Rorty (1979) and Friedrich Schelling (as translated by Heath, 1978). Idealism posits that reality is not an objective given but is mediated through human consciousness and language. Plato's "Theory of Forms" laid the groundwork for this view by asserting that what we perceive is shaped by our conceptual frameworks and cognitive structures. In Rorty's (1979) formulation, language is not merely a tool for describing the world but is constitutive of social reality. Meaning is produced through shared practices and social interactions. Thus, the language used to describe gender roles, relations, and identities both reflects and sustains societal perceptions. Within this framework, gendered language is not neutral; it is ideologically embedded and contributes to the (re)production of inequality. The study adopts this lens to interrogate how language encodes, reinforces, or subverts gender norms in the Nigerian sociocultural context.

### **Methodology**

The research employs a discussion-based qualitative methodology, grounded in secondary data analysis. Rather than collecting primary data, the study synthesises peer-reviewed literature, policy documents, and theoretical perspectives to interpret gendered language practices. According to the Sacred Heart University Library (n.d.), the discussion method allows for critical engagement with existing knowledge to derive new insights and articulate nuanced interpretations of social phenomena. Through integrative review, the study evaluates how gender is linguistically constructed and socially reproduced, drawing upon diverse sociolinguistic, feminist, and cultural studies frameworks. Emphasis is placed on interpretative depth, coherence, and cultural specificity in examining the intersection of gender, language,

and perception.

### **Findings**

The extensive literature reviewed for this study reveals a number of salient insights concerning the relationship between language use and gender. These findings shed light on the social, cultural, and linguistic mechanisms through which gendered communication is constructed and maintained. A central observation is the principle of lexical neutrality, which posits that words and expressions are not inherently gendered. Rather, gendered meanings are socially imposed upon otherwise neutral linguistic forms. This suggests that language, far from being a fixed or immutable system, is a socially constructed medium that reflects prevailing ideologies. The implication is that language practices can and should be reformulated to align with more inclusive and egalitarian norms. As Baxter (2021) argues, promoting gender-neutral language is a crucial strategy for dismantling systemic inequalities embedded in everyday communication.

The study also highlights the role of gender roles and perception in shaping language use. Societal expectations that assign specific behavioural scripts to men and women significantly influence both the production and interpretation of language. These traditional roles often lead to asymmetrical discursive power, particularly in public and formal contexts, where male-dominated speech styles are privileged over those associated with women. Consequently, women's voices are frequently marginalised or perceived as less authoritative (UNESCO, 2021). A further dimension is found in differential vocabulary usage, which reflects patterns established through early gendered socialisation. Empirical studies indicate that women are more likely to use hedges, intensifiers, and emotive or relational vocabulary, whereas men tend to favour assertive, direct, and pragmatic language structures. This dichotomy reinforces the stereotypical perception of women as emotional and men as rational an opposition that sustains gendered hierarchies in both interpersonal and institutional discourse (Coates, 2020).

Language variation, however, is not uniform or universal. Rather, it is deeply shaped

by sociocultural conditioning. Factors such as age, ethnicity, religion, class, and educational background significantly influence the ways in which individuals employ language. These intersections reveal the multiplicity and fluidity of gendered linguistic identities, challenging any simplistic or monolithic account of how men and women speak. Holmes and Marra (2011) highlight the centrality of sociolinguistic diversity in interpreting leadership discourse, particularly at the intersection of gender and ethnicity, demonstrating how identity performance is context-dependent and culturally mediated. Finally, the study identifies the persistence of enduring gender bias in linguistic practices. Despite increasing awareness and policy advocacy, deeply ingrained beliefs in female inferiority continue to influence how women are spoken about and addressed. The continued use of gender-marked occupational titles such as “waitress”, “hostess”, or “actress” exemplifies this linguistic inequality. These terms not only signal gender unnecessarily but also often carry connotations of lesser status. Transitioning to gender-neutral alternatives like “server”, “host”, or “actor” represents a tangible step toward promoting linguistic justice and gender equity (UN Women, 2022). Taken together, these findings underscore the urgent need for critical engagement with the way’s language reflects, enforces, and

potentially transforms societal attitudes towards gender. They also highlight the importance of rethinking linguistic practices within educational, professional, and everyday contexts to foster greater inclusivity and equity.

### Conclusion

This study reinforces the urgent need to reshape societal attitudes towards gender and language. Creating a linguistically inclusive environment is essential for enabling equitable participation in public, educational, and political discourse. Governments, educators, and civil society must champion policies that promote gender-sensitive language, challenge entrenched stereotypes, and affirm diverse gender identities. Future linguistic practice must move beyond tokenistic adjustments to embrace a transformative orientation. This includes institutionalising gender-inclusive curricula, developing pedagogical frameworks that reflect gender plurality, and fostering interdisciplinary research to uncover the nuanced ways language mediates gender. Finally, the study advocates for a gender-free linguistic environment, where language functions as a tool for empowerment rather than exclusion. Only through critical reflection, inclusive policy-making, and community engagement can linguistic practices evolve to dismantle entrenched gender hierarchies and foster genuine equity.

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