Vol. 1, No. 2; December (2025)
E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

Gendered Language Use among Students: Epithets and Euphemisms

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Abstract
The study explores gendered language use among students of the Faculty of Humanities, Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu-Alike, Nigeria using Robin Lakoff's theory of Women's Language. It investigates the difference in the use of epithets and euphemisms between the male and female students, calculates the frequency, identifies the positive and negative epithets used by male and female students and also highlights and analyse the cultural factors responsible for these differences in men and women. The results shows that female students used for the study showed a higher propensity in the use of gendered epithets than their male counterparts. There was a little difference in the use of euphemisms, and cultural factors such as social roles and cultural norms were highlighted to be responsible for these differences. It concludes that there is a difference in women and men's use of language especially in respect of the use of epithets and euphemisms and calls for further studies on Gendered Language Use among people of other occupations and social status.
Keywords: Gendered language, Epithets, Euphemisms, Cultural factors.

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Introduction

The term "gender" is sometimes misunderstood by some certain people by considering it as the same as "sex". In fact, according to Shubhra (2006), sex is designation based on biology, whereas gender is socially and psychologically constructed by the process of interactions in the family, social and education setting. Penelope and sally (2003) also describe gender "as not something we have, but something we do, something we perform. Sex is a biological categorization based primarily on reproductive potential, whereas gender is the social elaboration of biological sex. Gender is referred variously across areas of social science. In a specific social setting, the culture legalizes values, expectations, meaning and patterns of behaviour and communication of its society. Based on what is been taught concerning gender, women are assumed in home making, care giving and subservient roles and men the breadwinner and provider for the family. Related to gender in language, Sidiqi (2003) mentions that "in linguistics, the term referred to the grammatical categories that indexed sex in structure of human language". Language is a cultural element used to transmit and share these gender roles among members of a given social group from one generation to another. Language is a resource which can be drawn on creatively, to perform different aspects of one's social role and identity at different points in interaction. Language exists as a system of symbols, in terms of abstract thinking and senses. It reveals a method and pattern to describe the objective world. Language gives shape to people's thought and guides and controls their activities. It is a carrier of civilization and culture as human thoughts and philosophy are conveyed from generation to the other (Syal and Jindal (001).

One topic that comes to the fore in sociolinguistics in recent years is the connection if any, between the structure, vocabularies and the ways of using particular languages and social roles of men and women who speak these languages. Sociolinguistics among other field of study, deals with the scope of linguistics and provides several evidences on gender related issues. Hudson (1995) sees sociolinguistics as the relationship between language and society. Hence, sociolinguistics in this study will be viewed from the perspective of identifying the ways in which gender influences the use of language in a given society.

It is the belief of linguists that, language use and gender are connected. It is however known that, language is a tool for human communication and it inevitably features gender issues. The link between language and gender has provided a fertile area for researcher in sociolinguistics for decades now. The use of euphemism is a known driver of language change. Allan and Burridge, (2019) stated that euphemisms are words or phrases substituted for other words thought to be offensive to avoid the face, either one's own face or, that of the audience, or of their third party. Fromkin (2020) defined euphemism as a word or phrase that replaces a taboo word or serves to avoid frightening or unpleasant subjects. He also says that euphemism is used because there is a prohibition on the use of, mention of, or association with particular objects or person.

Furthermore, Leech and Rawson (2005) explain that euphemism is a word or phrase which people use in place of terms which are more disagreeable or offensive to them or to their audience. When a phrase becomes a euphemism, it's literal meaning is often pushed aside. Euphemism is used to hide unpleasant ideas, even when the term for them is not necessarily offensive. The example of euphemism is given by Larson (1994) as follows: "he is sleeping with

E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

his father in heaven". From the example, "he is sleeping" is euphemism in style. It is used to replace the word "died" because the word "died" is considered offensive and unpleasant instead of the phrase "he is sleeping." The use of "chubby" instead of "fat" to describe a person, "handicap" to describe a physically challenged person are all forms of euphemistic use of language. Also, epithets are a key element of literary expressions, often used to convey complex meanings and evoke emotion. By attaching descriptive modifiers to nouns, writers craft vivid images and create layers of meaning. An epithet is a descriptive term or phrase that characterizes a person or thing. It can highlight a particular quality or attribute, and it is often used in literature or everyday language. For example, in the expression "Alexander the great", "the great" is used to highlight his greatness. Words like "out-spoken", "jovial", "sociable", "heavily endowed" are all epithets used to describe people.

Linguists have in recent times been focusing on how men and women speak, and to provide imperial evidences on the questions such as: do men and women speak differently? Literature is replete with findings and identification of speech styles and correlation with gender variables. Throughout different cultures and languages, it has been observed that men and women use language differently, and some of these have been remarked upon for centuries. Studies surrounding language and gender has historically been framed as characterization of women's language. Scholars like Lakoff (1973), Jespersen (2013), Coates (2015), have explored this concept. Lakoff (1973) in particular proposes women speech as more polite, characterised by the frequent use of euphemism, flowery words, adjectives, and in soft tones unlike that of men. Like Lakoff, Jespersen (2013) also claims that woman use euphemisms more often, and discusses this supposed characteristic of women's language at length. Both Lakoff and Jespersen believe that women use euphemisms more out of desire to speak more tactfully and to avoid directly mentioning "unladylike" topics. However, since this study aims at exploring the various cultural and social factors responsible for the disparity of language use among men and women, it adopts Robin Lakoff's theory of women's language (1973), Deficit hypothesis of Basil Bernstein (1962) and Male Dominance theory of Zimmerman and West (1975). These are frameworks that explain the factors responsible for language disparity in men and women. Therefore, the analysis will attempt to discuss the cultural and social factors that are inherent among randomly selected students of Faculty of Humanities, Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Ebonyi State, by identifying euphemisms and epithets used by both male and female students, identifying positive and negative euphemisms used, calculating the frequency, highlighting and analysing the cultural factors responsible for the difference in language use between them.

Language and Gender

The terminology used to name the difference between men and women has either been sex or gender. These two terms have been clearly differentiated by authors such as Coates (1993) and Cameron (2006). Coates (1993) postulates that whereas sex refers to biological distinction, gender is employed to describe socially constructed roles based on sex. In a relatively similar vein, Cameron (2006), indicate that sex is employed in connection with the biological characteristics that mark humans and other animals either male or female, but gender refers to the cultural traits and behaviours considered appropriate for men and women by a particular society. Men and women are social beings. Language is an important tool for the people. As mankind has gender differences, language has the same. There are certain differences when it

E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710
comes to language use by men and women. The study of how gender is reflected in language is a recent branch of linguistics and its interests are on three levels:

1. The gender difference in the utterance style
2. The gender difference in language form and structure and
3. Reason for gender differences in language.

Within various cultures, there remains a deep-rooted belief about how men and women behave and are supposed to behave. A major part is based upon how they speak and it has developed into the field of "folk linguistics" Broadbridge (2013). In order to find some possible answers about gender differences in language use, one has to look at historical background. Old letters, novels, diaries and poem provide us with evidence of the folk linguistics beliefs regarding gender differences in language. Cameron (1990) opines that "language is in one sense the inalienable birth right of every human being, regardless of gender..." More so, sociolinguistics study of gender shows that variation in the use of language according to gender is intimately connected to socio-cultural patterns which reflect socio-economic and political inequality and male dominance in many societies. Reflecting social status or power difference, Lakoff (1975) in her research claims that women's language as a whole reveals women's social powerlessness and is thus dominated by stylistic feature significantly insecurity and lack of assertiveness. She further argues that female language is consequently heavily influenced by pragmatic principle of politeness which basically rules adaptive social behaviour. The different views of language and gender as elicited above have come to a common ground that language and gender are inseparable and if any major difference exist, it becomes obvious in the intention of the user.

Differences in Men and Women's Speech

Lakeoff (1975) claims that are a number of lexical, grammatical and phonological features that characterise women's language. She suggests an explanation that in the society, women spend more of their time on colour-related activities such as choosing clothes than men do. They prefer to use colour terms such as azure (blue), mauve (lavender), aquamarine (blue-green) beige, ecru and so on. These words are unfamiliar for men. According to Wenjing (2012), women always use a word with exaggerated significance, such as 'gorgeous', 'lovely', 'cute', 'divine', 'adorable', 'darling' and so on. While men use the plain words to enhance effect, like good, really and so. According to Ning & Dai (2010), there are differences in men and women selection of topics. Topics on sports, politics, and economics are majorly selected by men. On the other hand, education and family are the major topics selected by women. Lydie Meunier (1996) states in his article "the topics such as sports, politics and cars which are seen as 'serious' are preserved for men only, the choice for women are the topics such as child-bearing and personal relationships which are labelled as 'trivial'. Women tend to see conversation as an opportunity to discuss problems, share experience and offer support. But men however see discussion about personal problem as an abnormal component of conversation.

Also, studies on interruption phenomena in conversation also shed more light on sex difference in language. Typically, women are known to nag, chatter, talk too much and little too little, and are suspected to be the major cause of interruption in interaction. Research findings reveal the opposite. Zimmerman and West (1975) found that 98% of interruption in mixed sex conversation was made by men. Interruption is a mechanism by which males deploy to prevent females from

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ISSN:3121-7710
talking and with that they gain the floor for themselves. This contributes to the contradiction and maintenance of male supremacy.

Theoretical Frameworks

Many theories exist in the field of language study and sociolinguistics is not an exemption. Among these theories, the Lakoff's theory of Women's Language has been greatly favoured in this research alongside with the Basil Bernstein's Deficit Hypothesis and Thomas Henley's Male Dominance. Feminist writers have identified male dominance as the chief cause of language difference between male and females. Lakeoff (1975) argues that women used these features because they are denied means of strong expression within a male-dominated society. As Lackoff (1975) notes, "The ultimate... is that women are systematically denied access to power, on the grounds that they are not capable of holding it as demonstrated by their linguistic behaviour along with other aspects of their behaviour..." Lakoff believes that the distinction between men's and women's language is a symptom of a problem in our culture and not primarily the problem itself.

Lakoff (1975) thus propounded the theory of female language where she emphasised that the female register relies essentially on the idea that there are sex-exclusive makers (linguistic features that are used by only one sex) rather than sex-preferential makers (features used more frequently by one sex than by the other). For instance, it is the case that adjectives of approval such as "lovely", "gorgeous", "divine" are used exclusively by women, but "great", "terrific", "neat" and so on are used by both sexes, then it is not unreasonable to see the situation in terms of an opposition between female and neutral discourses. This theory helps us to identify the linguistic and cultural factors responsible for the differences in the speech of males and females, language user and also helps us to understand the science of the meaning of same speech by both male and female but different interpretation. We can therefore, conclude that because the role of men and women are structure by the society. Hence, they exhibit the normal 'power' relationship that exists in the society (male dominant and women subservient). Thus, their linguistic patterns are influenced by their behaviour since that is how they are been brought us to behave.

Another theory applied in the study is Deficit Hypothesis propounded by Basil Bernstein (1962). It states that "the social success of members of a society and their access to social privileges is directly dependent on the degree of organization of their linguistic message. The theory behind Bernstein's distinction is that different linguistic forms originate in the different psychological and social experience of their speakers, thus regarding these experiences as being determined by membership of a particular social class. The other theory is Male Dominance by Throne and Henley (1975) who argued that the male dominance has powerfully shaped the meaning of words referring to both sexes. To this they observed that "word associated with males more often have positive connotations; they convey notion of power and leadership. In contrast, female words are more often negative, conveying weakness, inferiority, immaturity, a sense of trivial." With the three theories highlighted, efforts now made to ascertain the used or gendered language by male and female students in Faculty of Humanities, Alex Ekwueme University Ndufu-Alike.

Vol. 1, No. 2; December (2025)
E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

Methodology

This study used the mixed method research design in order to present the qualitative and the quantitative analysis. The data was selected and sampled using the simple random technique. The instrument used for the study was a descriptive composition/audio recording. Here, the respondents were asked to write a descriptive composition of not less than 200 words, analysing the physical attributes of their course representative in class. This method of data analysis used in this study is in line with Lakoff's (1975) level of data analysis**.** She identified a number of linguistic features which she claimed were used more often by women than men which in her opinion express uncertainty and lack of confidence. The features considered using Lakoff's analysis are the use of adjectives and euphemisms. However, the data was analysed using frequency count with regards to the research objectives. The formula used to find the average mean is: Σfx/n.

Analysis

Objective 1.

Identify the epithets and euphemism, used by female students.

From the written and voice recorded compositions administered on and collected from the participating female students in the study, the following are the descriptive epithets identified by the researcher: "beautiful", "pretty", "adorable", "generous", "kind", "cute", "good", "lovely", "nice", "sweet", "marvellous", "great", "admirable", "ravishing," "neat", and "intelligent".

Also, the research identified the following euphemisms from the respondents' work: "chubby", "lady", and "endowed".

Objective 2.

Identify the epithets and euphemisms used by male students.

From the written and voice recorded composition administered on and collected from the participating male students in the study, the following are the identified descriptive epithets by the researcher: "beautiful", "intelligent", "sociable", "out spoken", "respectable", "kind", "jovial", and "assertive".

Similarly, from the male respondents' written and voice recorded composition, the following are the euphemisms identified: "lady", "chubby", and "heavily endowed".

Objective 3

Identify the use of positive and negative epithets by female and male students.

From the written and voice recorded composition administered on and collected from the participating male and female students in the study, the following are identified positive and negative epithets by the researcher.

Table 4.1 (a) below presents the positive and negative epithets used by male and female students.

Positive epithets	Negative epithets
Beautiful	NIL
Intelligent	NIL
Kind	NIL
Adorable	NIL
Good	NIL
Lovely	NIL

E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

Ravishing	NIL
Sweet	NIL
Great	NIL
Sociable	NIL
Out-spoken	NIL
Respectable	NIL
Kind	NIL
Jovial	NIL

From table 4.1(a) above, it reveals that male and female students expressed their thoughts about the object under investigation by using positive epithets.
However, the study showed that there was no use of epithets by either male or female students.

Objective 4
Calculate the frequency on the use of epithets and euphemisms by male and female students.
Table 4.1(b) below presents the frequency on the use of epithet as used by male and female students in the study. The formula used to find the average mean is: Σfx/n
Table 4.1(b)
Frequency on the use of adjectives used by male and female students (no = 56, i.e. 28 males, 28 females)

Male students		Female students	
Identified epithets	Frequency	Identified epithets	Frequency
Beautiful	18	Beautiful	21
Sociable	10	Pretty	18
Out spoken	15	Adorable	12
Respectable	13	Generous	15
Kind	10	Kind	13
Jovial	12	Good	20
Assertive	11	Lovely	15
		Marvellous	11
		Ravishing	7
		Sweet	6
		Great	10
		Admirable	20
		Intelligent	15
		Neat	10
Total Average	12.71	Total Average	13.78

From table 4.1(b) above, it reveals that male students expressed their perceptions of the object under investigation by using epithets that relate to the behaviour and personal qualities of the object. Whereas the females' students used much more epithets that relate to their emotions and the appearance of the objects under investigation. Hence, there is influence of gender in the students' use of epithets in their communication pattern. Also, female students used much more epithets than their male counterpart.

E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

Table 4.1(c) below presents the frequency on the use of euphemisms by male and female students. The formula used to find the average mean is: Σfx/n

Table 4.1(c)

Frequency on the use of euphemisms by male and female students.

Male students		Female students	
Identified euphemisms	Frequency	Identified euphemisms	Frequency
Lady	9	Lady	8
Chubby	10	Chubby	10
Heavily endowed	4	Endowed	4
Total Average	7.6	Total Average	7.3

Table 4.1(c) shows the frequency on the use of euphemisms by male and female students in the written and voice recording composition. These three examples of euphemisms (lady, chubby, endowed) were used by the male students at the frequency of 10, 9 and 4 respectively. While their female counterparts also used three euphemisms (lady, chubby and heavily endowed) at the frequency of 8, 10, and 4 respectively.

The implication of this is that, both male students and female students utilized euphemism in their compositions, even they used almost the same sets of euphemisms. Hence, there is a little gender difference in the use of euphemism among students' use of language in the university community in FUNAI.

Differences in the use intensifier

From the table 4.1(c) above, "heavily endowed" used by male students shows that male students used more intensifiers than female students. The use of "heavily" in the male students' description also shows that men use more intensifiers than women.

Objective 4

Highlight and analyse the cultural factors responsible for the differences in the use of epithets and euphemisms between male and female students.

According to Lakoff (1973), the difference in language use between men and women are caused by cultural factors and not language itself. These factors are highlighted discussed below:

Social Roles: Social roles are a socially defined pattern of behaviour that is expected of persons who occupy a certain social position or belong to a particular social category. Men and women's social role is different as they carry out different social responsibilities in social activities and this influences even their use of language (epithets and euphemisms).

Cultural Bias: This is a skewed way of viewing or talking about a group that is typically negative. The cultural bias nature of the society has a way of creeping into persons' daily language use. The society is men-centred.

Cultural Value: This is the core principle or ideas that an entire community or society is based around. It revolves around how people talk and behave. Value is the core of culture; hence, different values also influence men and women's vocabulary use including the types and use of adjectives and euphemisms expressed by them.

Gender: The society has however, structured a woman to act "lady-like" (linguistically and in other ways) and this in turn keeps them in their place, because "lady like" preludes being "powerful" in our culture.

Vol. 1, No. 2; December (2025)
E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

Recommendations

Culture influences language and language culture, this in turn form the foundation on which a society is built and run; therefore, this study recommends that:

1. The use of more adjectives by women should not been seen as a sign of inferiority or lack of confidence but as proclaimed by Lakoff, but it shows that women are more sensitive to the environment and more likely to express their emotions with the world.
2. Euphemisms are words used to replace offensive, taboo or swear words. This study shows that there were no differences in the use of euphemism by both male and female students. It therefore recommends that, both men and women should be sensitive or conscious of their choice of word during communication so as to not offend their listeners
3. Theories used to analyse early works on Language and Gender may not be effective in our today's society as this study disagrees to the assertions of most studies that women use more euphemisms than men.

E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

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