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## Language and power relations in gendered discourse within EkeGusii: Implications on pedagogy in the Kenyan context

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### Abstract

This paper presents a discussion of language and power relations between men and women in EkeGusii and makes consideration with regards to how EkeGusii has constructed men and women to use language differently. Data was collected through participatory observation as well as own intuition and document analysis. The social theory is used to analyse data. Social theory is fundamental in this paper because gendered discourse is a social rather than biological construction and that social theory analyses language in society and what language use means to its users. It is recommended that EkeGusii *chinsoni* (statutes) for language be aligned with the Kenya Constitution in order to guarantee equal linguistic rights to both men and women. There is need for the curriculum to consider the learner's sociolinguistic culture in order to play mitigative role in enabling girls realise equity of participation in the classroom process since school is taking over the socialization of an individual.

**Keywords:** culture, gendered discourse, pedagogy, power relations, social construction, statutes

### Public Interest Statement

The discussion on language and power relations follows the premise that language and culture are inseparable. Culture is an integrated sum total of learned behavior traits that are manifested and shared among members of society. Power relations are defined by *Chinsoni* (statutes). *Chinsoni* (statutes) are a collection of undocumented code of social conduct that govern behavior of a Gusii person.

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## Introduction

Language is a conventional medium of communication whose function among others is a means through which one group influences the other creating power relations between speaker and hearer. The relationship between language and power is mutual and social in the sense that through language its phatic function is realized and the social aspect reinforced. Powerful institutions and individuals use language to construct their power and as a way to maintain it. This is what forms part of Halliday's 1961 theory of functionalism which looks at language as a social system. As a system language enables the speakers to engage in a variety of social actions. One such institutionalized system is found in Gusii where EkeGusii operates a system governed by *chinsoni* (statutes) that socializes men to apply language differently from women. *Chinsoni* (statutes) define social behavior of the Gusii. *Chinsoni* (statutes) are a collection of undocumented code of social conduct that governs Gusii behavior. The statutes stipulate various ways in which people belonging to different gender relate in varied contexts. *Chinsoni* (statutes) are carried out through language which is the medium through which social lives (culture) is carried out and human beings are constructed by culture. Human beings become what they are through socialization and that socialization takes place using the mother language. Since language is power, it enables us to influence other people to feel and act in certain ways. The power behind language is a speaker's possession which may include high social status or other attractive personal qualities. The assignment of power in the Gusii society is done using *chinsoni* (statutes) for language. The Gusii assign more linguistic power to the male and puts women lower in the hierarchy and this is reflected in the way each gender applies language. *Chinsoni* (statutes) tend to favour boys over girls in the classroom and this affect performance in National examinations. Currently, the competence based curriculum is being implemented putting mother tongue the fulcrum in order to exploit the learner's potential. However, the following questions linger on;

1. What measures has the Gusii society put in place to ensure that both boys and girls are given a level playground in participating fully during the CBC classroom process?
2. Are there guidelines put in place by KICD on how the aspect of language right is upheld in order to enhance gender equity in a Gusii classroom environment?

These questions are arising when the rest of the world are going back to their mother languages by strengthening them and enhancing their literacy while EkeGusii is standing the ground of maintaining the status quo by being reluctant in elevating the status of Gusii women by empowering them linguistically to operate in all spheres that require language use. Onchoke (2018) for instance, observes that both male and female are valuable and that there is a clear division of labour between the sexes in the Gusii society. These findings differ with (Choti 1998) who attributes differences in men's and women's social ranks to social forces. These social forces are said to be socially driven through *chinsoni* (statutes) by (Obwoye 2014). Away from studies centering on EkeGusii, there are studies whose findings exhibit that women occupy lower ranks in society. Holmes (1992) for instance has

written extensively on linguistic sexism. Drawing examples from different communities of the world; England, New Zealand, America, Malagasy and Malaysia. She is of the view that the relative status of the sexes in society may be reflected not only in the ways in which women and men use language, but also in the language used about women and men. In this case therefore, gender apart from being a biological construction, is an aspect of culture which assigns men and women certain roles that cause variation in their lexical choices. Since socialization of a Gusii child with regards to male and female starts at birth and graduates to naming and finally the circumcision school, the input being socialization based on *chinsoni* (statutes) other forms of subsequent learning are built based upon the set standards set by culture.

In Gusii society, a child was born to an already predetermined social settings since a child was born to a cultural social set up system. The child is caught up in a complex cultural web that s/he cannot alter (Akama and Maxon:2006). Names were given to children without the children's idea what the names stood for. Naming of female children is much more obvious than male children. A male name is sort for from powerful ancestral family names or borrowed from famous names of neighbouring communities or even given names of wild as well as domesticated animals. Some of the names identified in Onchoke (2018) include the following names;

Names associated with Animals and their symbolic Representation

Kerongo from <i>ekerongo</i> (porcupine)	striker
Mbeche from <i>embeche</i> (warthog)	ugly
Machogu from <i>enchogu</i> (elephant)	elegant/big
Ong'ondi from <i>eng'ondi</i> (sheep)	stupid/calm
Nyang'au from <i>enyang'au</i> (hyena)	greedy
Basweti from <i>ebasweti</i> (python)	pretentious
Simba from <i>esimba</i> (lion)	brave

The names of animals are given to Gusii male children. The owners of these names are socialized to act in defence of the community using the traits of these animals. Names such as *simba, chui, enchogu, ekerongo* are preferent in cheering the candidates during political campaigns in Gusii. EkeGusii also borrows names of powerful people from other communities to enrich their names. One could therefore argue that the language has restructured its onomastic system by in morphologically, processing to make them conform into the phonotactics of the language. Names of powerful past and present politicians are also preferent in EkeGusii onomastics. They include; Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, Koffi Annan the eminent personality who together with Graca Marchel came to broker peace during the post election violence (PEV) in Kenya in 2007/2008, Nelson Mandela of South Africa, Obama of USA, former president Moi and Jomo Keyatta of Kenya, Oginga Odinga the father of multiparty politics in Kenya, Sagini and Onyonka (former prominent intelligent Gusii politicians). Dr. Bob Mbori (a linguist and academician) is the latest to have his name given to male children born in Gusii outside his clan. Onchoke (2018) observes that

personal names provide an important component of African cultural identities and play psychological roles in establishing a personal identity. These names influence the way male children think and as they grow up they focus on realising something that goes with their names. For instance, male children in Gusii are allowed to attend political rallies, participate in burial rites and attend barazas.

The male children are taught bravery from a tender age and they grow knowing that they have to live to the expectations of their names. They grow knowing that at one point they will seize power from the older generation and defend their community in time of need or represent their community in parliament. Women are made to believe that they are weak and vulnerable and grow up looking unto their male counterparts for defence and protection. This is however, true owing to the fact that women become weak during pregnancy and lactation period when children depend on their well being and may not be in a position to engage in activities outside the home nor are they allowed to do so. Clearly, women are not equal with men in the use of language and are seen to be operating without rights to public participation and expression. This would make part of what Ogechi (2003:1) consider to be infringement in private and public levels of language use.

### **Methodology**

Participatory observation and own intuition was used to collect data. Secondary data was also elicited from document analysis.

### **Theory**

Critical discourse analysis theory would partly apply but the social theory is fundamental in this paper because the research extends beyond discourse between men and women or male and female talk to all aspects of language use such as in the church, market, social gatherings among others. There are many other contexts in which men and women apply language and power relations come into play based on socialisation. The social theory as derived from Boasian anthropology is fundamental because among other things, it analyses language in society with a focus on what language use means to its users. Language as it were operates differently in different environments and may exhibit inequalities in its application. EkeGusii usage exhibit underlying factors present in the various sets of its varieties. The social varieties used in EkeGusii circumcision school for instance, may come into play in the variety that is used in the CBC and influence the classroom process. The distribution of the elements in the circumcision social varieties are unequal (Obwoye 2014) and predict how intergroup behavior on the basis of perceived group status in the classroom is used. People learn to express themselves using language based on socialization and identify themselves using language to increase self-image in order to enhance the status of the group to which they belong. Language may be used in the classroom to draw attention of other members and may extend outside the class to organized groups such as political organisations, professional bodies and religious settings. Social theory is not limited to what language use means to its users since it can be applied

to make language use meaningful to its users.

The discussion in this paper has deliberately left out findings that show bias in the application of what is perceived to be the standard variety of EkeGusii in the classroom which may pose a challenge to learners who are socialized to use Ekemaate dialect because of the dialectal dominance of Ekerogoro over Ekemaate. The paper also leaves out the discussion on language and power relations that seem to measure one's ability to communicate effectively and probably influence others in order to bring out the aspect of language and power relations experienced by Gusii men and women based on the social construction of gender.

### **Gendered Discourse within EkeGusii**

Discourse creates an interface between language and its real world context with theorists relating discourse to power structures in a given society. EkeGusii society for instance is governed by *Chinsoni* (statutes) which socializes men and women differently. *Chinsoni* (statutes) stipulate various ways in which people belonging to different gender relate in discourse based on context. EkeGusii use in gendered discourse also follow these statutes to reinforce the power structures as stipulated by *chinsoni* (statutes). In all instances of EkeGusii (language) use apart from that relating to child birth and naming of children the statutes for language tend to favour men over women. During child birth and naming ceremonies however, discourse seems to be reinforcing women who may appear to dominate the men. With the picture of language and power relations between men and women in Gusii, the paper focuses on gendered discourse putting the competence based curriculum (CBC) into perspective.

Gender in this case goes beyond one's biological sex and becomes part of the psychological, social and cultural features and characteristics strongly associated with the biological categories of male and female (Gilbert, 1993, p. 111). This paper gives focus to the construction of gender along cultural features. EkeGusii constructs gender based on roles and socializes men to use language differently from women so that the language appears to have isoglosses to distinguish men from women thereby developing a staircase of hierarchies to categorize those occupied by women from those dominated by men.

Choti (1998) has explored the issue of language and hierarchy with regard to the portrayal of the Gusii woman. His work centers along the analysis of EkeGusii language forms and looks at words and phrases as well as semantic derogation of women by EkeGusii speakers. His findings show that nouns are intrinsically linked to the different roles that are ascribed to Gusii men and women. Choti (1998) attributes the differences in men's and women's social ranks to social forces rather than biological ones which for instance allow men and deny women from running or holding senior positions in EkeGusii society. As a result of the social construct; Gusii never elected a woman to parliament to represent a constituency. Election of the first two women from Kisii and Nyamira counties happened when the post of Woman Representative was created. The assumptions in this paper makes reference to Wardhaugh (1986:13) whose argument that; boys and girls are brought up differently and men and women often fill different roles in society may be used

to explain language and power relations in Gusii. Therefore, in Gusii, each gender is socially conditioned to show linguistic differences especially after circumcision.

Trudgill (1973, p. 88) says that men and women are socially different in that society lays down differently social roles for them and expects different behavior patterns from them. Holmes (1992) argues that the relative status of the sexes in a society may be reflected not only in the ways in which women and men use language but also in the language used about women and men. In other words gender, apart from being a biological construction is an aspect of culture but should this be left at that?

Other countries in Africa have aligned themselves with the UN 's 1948 declaration of Human Rights which states that;

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in the declaration of Human Rights without distinction of any kind such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

The declaration is however, violated knowingly or unknowingly since statutes such as the ones operated by EkeGusii *chinsoni* for language continue imposing hindrances to women maintaining the position that society has already predestinated women to occupy lower positions in Gusii society and therefore the status quo remains.

### **Implications of Language and Power Relations on Pedagogy in the Kenyan CBC Classroom**

In terms of language policy and language use the National Government (NG) is in line with the Kenya Constitution (2010) and the UNESCO 1953. KICD has developed designs for language and literacy in line with the CBC. It is however, doubtful if society will allow implementation process to provide enabling environment for girls to realize enhanced access to linguistic power. It is expected that the National curriculum implementation will take place in class and within the confines of school with EkeGusii *chinsoni* (statutes) for language taking precedence outside the classroom. Language use outside the classroom will affect language use in the classroom and consequently, affect the lives of many girls in their future roles in society.

The Kenya educational curriculum makes Mother Tongue the medium of instruction in lower primary. This position has been maintained by all commissions set up to make recommendations for education. Researchers in language policy also recommend that Mother Tongue use go beyond Lower Primary Level. Specifically, Ogechi (2003, p. 284) recommends that the use of Mother Tongue be extended to as late as possible. In particular, pupils should begin their schooling through the medium of the Mother Tongue because they understand it best. This recommendation is supported by theories of child language acquisition and language learning since Mother tongue has many advantages when used in learning arithmetic skills, life skills, environmental skills among other areas of school socialization. Mother tongue acts as a metalanguage to learning subsequent languages such as English and French which form part of learning areas in higher levels. In

other words Mother Tongue connects known to unknown and concrete to abstract ideas. Mother tongue helps the learner develop positive self-concept and well-being and extend this to their cognitive development while learning second and or subsequent languages. The level of competence in the second language will be related to the level of competence achieved in their first language. Mother tongue education in primary school is the best introduction to literacy which lays a foundation for second language acquisition. The learners in primary school are within the critical period of learning language because they are motivated to do so. The UNESCO Committee of 1953 shows that students learn quickly through their first language than unfamiliar linguistic medium. There is sufficient evidence to support using Mother Tongue in learning from all stakeholders but this has escaped the minds of custodians of EkeGusii *chinsoni* (statutes) for language.

In order for a girl whose socialization started way back at birth to realize a smooth transition from home to school using EkeGusii Mother Tongue as a medium of instruction, the questions raised in this paper should be addressed. Probably, sex education may become a mitigative measure in curbing EkeGusii *chinsoni* (statutes) for language from preventing Mother Tongue to be meaningful in Gusii learning environments.

## Conclusion

Culture, through socialization, reinforces social inequalities between men and women using language. Limiting women's use of language denies them access to power and authority and as a result considered a weaker sex. The way women are socialized goes as far as losing their identity. A Gusii woman is addressed as mo'kanyarebe (so and so's wife), ng'ina nyarebe (so and so's mother), mosubati o'nyarebe (daughter of so and so), or simply as 'aye' – you. Women talk and think as much as men do, and with few exceptions in the first instance largely from women, usually and predominantly our mothers. Our first tongue is called our mother tongue in English and in any other language.

## Practical implications

It can be substantiated that Gusii girls have access to education and that education for all (EFA) is indeed a reality but education for life is far from being realized. The issues raised in this paper clearly show that there is need in maintaining gender equity within the literacy program in the curriculum. Women should be enabled to use language to play an emancipation role and be empowered to relate in a much more level ground with men in all spheres of life in order to make language meaningful. EkeGusii *chinsoni* (statutes) for language should be aligned to that aspect of the Kenyan Constitution that guarantees linguistic rights and have these rights clearly spelt out in the directorates for culture in the Ministry of Culture and Social services in Kisii and Nyamira Counties. There is need for custodians of *chinsoni* (statutes) for language to allow women to access linguistic power and public participation with a view of providing a level playground for women to participate in mainstream politics. Currently, women get to parliament through affirmative action or and through slots that have been created for women representative at the county and National levels.

### **Abbreviations**

**CBC**-Competence-Based Curriculum

**EFA**-Education for All

**KICD**-Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development

**NG**-National Government

**PEV**-Post Election Violence

**UN**-United Nations

**UNESCO**-United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organizations

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### **Author Biography**

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