Sexism and Feminine Gender Misrepresentation: Pragmatic Implications

Rosarri C. Mbisike, PhD

Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Lagos State University, Lagos, Nigeria

Abstract

The feminine gender, widely categorized as the weaker vessel, has been greatly undermined within the Nigerian society such that certain expressions ascribed to that gender carry negative connotations that are derogatory and demeaning. This research examines those derogatory expressions with the objective to project some aspects of misrepresentation of the feminine gender, as well as propose positive approaches to the perception of the feminine gender in the dominant cultures in Nigeria. The theoretical orientation of this research hinges on Grice's conversational implicature, situated in the domain of Pragmatics, which is a sub-field of Linguistics. The methodology adopted for this research is qualitative and its paradigm is interpretive.

Keywords: *Conversational Implicature, Feminine Gender, Misrepresentation, Nigeria, Pragmatics, Sexism.*

Introduction

The feminine gender, widely categorized as the weaker vessel, has been greatly undermined within the Nigerian society, such that certain expressions ascribed to that gender carry negative connotations that are derogatory, demeaning, and obvious instances of sexism. Sexism pervades the entire facets of the Nigerian society, including the context of traffic, which stimulated the focus of this research.

This research examines, from a pragmatic perspective, some gendered derogatory expressions used in traffic, in Nigeria. The objectives of the study are:

- to project some aspects of misrepresentation of the feminine gender and their implications.
- to propose positive approaches to the perception of the feminine gender in the Nigerian society.

The focus of this research is on engaging with a pragmatic analysis of sexism in traffic, as it pertains to the misrepresentation of the feminine gender in Nigeria. Many works have been carried out on gender-related issues in connection with gender representations such as discrimination, marginalization, subjugation, inequality, etc. However, this research focuses on the misrepresentation of the feminine gender in Nigeria, with focus on sexism in traffic. In this connection, this study is concerned with unravelling the following research questions:

- What are the causes of sexism in traffic?
- What are the causes of the misrepresentation of the feminine gender in Nigeria?
- What are the implications of the misrepresentation of the feminine gender?
- What are the positive approaches that could enhance the

perception of the feminine gender in the Nigerian society?

Expectedly, literature on feminine gender from diverse perspectives abounds, some of which are presented as follows. Agbalajobi (2010) highlighted gender discrimination and notes that the main factor that leads to discrimination against women has its roots in the nature of our societies which celebrate men as being unique, stronger and fit for the public space, while women are feeble and weak, meant to stay within the private space.

Anyalebechi (2016) focused on gender inequality and imbalance in women participation in politics in Nigeria. She notes that though the Nigerian Constitution states that all human beings are equal, obviously, the nation has not achieved equality of male and female in all spheres of leadership.

Aladi and Okoro (2021) examined newspaper representations of women and observed that the volume related to women was poor. Additionally, women were accorded less prominence in newspaper representations.

Nevertheless, this research transcends instances of representations of the feminine gender to cases of misrepresentations of the feminine gender. The relevance of this study is such that through the pragmatic perspective, the implications of the misrepresentation of the feminine gender in Nigeria would be projected. In addition, positive approaches to the perception of the feminine gender in the Nigerian society would be highlighted.

Theoretical Perspective: Pragmatics
The theoretical orientation of this research is based mostly on the Linguistic sub-field called Pragmatics. Mbisike (2001: 183) states that: "Pragmatics is a theory of communication which deals with meaning in use." Mey (2001: 6) asserts that:

> Communication in society happens chiefly by means of language. However, the users of language, as social beings, communicate and use language on society's premises; society controls their access to the linguistic and communicative means. Pragmatics, as the study of the way humans use their language in communication, bases itself on a study of those premises and determines how they affect, and effectualize, human language use. Hence: Pragmatics studies the use of language in human communication as determined by the conditions of society.

Thus, pragmatics basically deals with utterance interpretation within a particular context. Sperber and Wilson (1981: 28) point out that "an adequate pragmatic theory should incorporate a general account of the processing of conceptual information in a context, and a particular account of whatever special principles and problems are involved in the processing of information that has been intentionally, and linguistically communicated." This proposition is hinged on the theory put forward by H.P. Grice (1975), in which he points out that in all communication, there is a general agreement of cooperation between a speaker and a hearer, which he called the Cooperative Principle (CP).

Cooperative Principle (CP)
The Cooperative Principle subsumes a set of maxims which specify the conventions that should govern participants in a conversation. The maxims, in other words, represent an attempt to account for how conversations are construed by participants in different speech situations. The maxims are as follows:

Quantity:
Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange). In other words, do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Quality:
Do not say what you believe to be false. This is to say that you should not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Relation:
Be relevant. Let your message be well related to, or connected with, the topic of discourse.

Manner:
Be perspicuous. Thus, let your message be clear by avoiding obscurity, and by avoiding ambiguity. As much as possible, make your message brief, as well as orderly.

These maxims show that the cooperative principle suggests that communication is essentially a co-operative endeavour governed by specifiable conventions. Basically, successful communication depends on cooperation between interlocutors, as well as on correct interpretation of messages.

The notion of interpretation is vital to comprehension of messages. Invariably, the interpretation of utterances involves making the right inferences and appropriate assumptions, which in pragmatics are called implicatures. It is only when utterances are correctly interpreted that communication can be successful.

Implicatures
Grice (1975) classifies Implicature into two types, namely: Conventional Implicature and Conversational Implicature. [See, Kempson (1977), Sadock (1978), Levinson (1983), Thomas

(1995), Yule (1996), Verschueren (1999), Mey (2001), Mbisike (2001), Huang (2007), Akmajian et. al. (2012).] For this research, the theoretical framework is concerned with the Conversational Implicature.

Conversational Implicature
On Conversational Implicature, Kempson (1977: 70) states that:

> Conversational Implicatures are assumptions over and above the meaning of the sentences used, which the speaker knows and intends that the hearer will make, in the face of an apparently open violation of the Co-operative Principle, in order to interpret the speaker's sentence in accordance with the Co-operative Principle.

Furthermore, Bilmes (1986: 27) highlights that:
> In everyday talk, we often convey propositions that are not explicit in our utterances but are merely implied by them. Sometimes we are able to draw such inferences only by referring what has been explicitly said to some conversational principle. In certain of these cases, we are dealing with ‚conversational implicature".

Essentially, conversational implicatures are non-trivial inferences that prevent breakdown in communication. Consider the following example:

Jane is the bridge in the team.

This utterance flouts the maxim of quality. It is a metaphorical expression, and it involves a non-linguistic knowledge of the world for the hearer to interpret it. Grice's implicatures provide us with a natural explanation of the interpretation of metaphor. To interpret

this utterance in accordance with the Cooperative Principle, the hearer must assume that the speaker is conveying extra information other than the literal meaning of the sentence. Since „bridge" is a structure that is built to span over a road, railway, river, valley, or some other obstacle, without blocking the way underneath, and constructed to provide passage over the obstacle so that people and vehicles can cross from one side to the other; the speaker is then saying that Jane is the link that connects the team members by closing communication gap through transmitting information across the team. Thus, the notion of conversational implicature provides us with an explanation of utterance interpretation. This interpretation was realized based on the assumption that in conversational interaction, interlocutors are guided by certain rules, which help to uphold the Cooperative Principle and thus prevent breakdown in communication.

To this extent, it is vital to investigate the feminine gender misrepresentation in traffic sexism, with the objective to examine the implicatures embedded in the gendered expressions, which the users intend to convey.

Materials and Method
The data for this research is a set of gendered derogatory expressions by men, collected through observation technique, from traffic in Lagos, Nigeria. Grice's conversational implicature is adopted for the analysis. The method of this research is qualitative. The methodological paradigm is interpretive, based on content analysis.

Feminine Gender Misrepresentation in Traffic Sexism
Consider the following expressions commonly heard while driving in cities in Nigeria, particularly in Lagos, which is largely cosmopolitan, densely populated, and prone to traffic congestions:

- Oh! That's a woman!
- Ah! Woman!
- Na woman, nah!
- No be woman?

All the above gendered expressions were uttered by men while in traffic; sometimes angrily; sometimes scornfully! The tone used to utter those expressions was usually harsh and harassing. On the surface, these utterances seem descriptive. However, their contextual meanings, through conversational implicatures, are very negative. All those expressions carry negative connotations which are:

- Derogatory
- Undermining
- Degrading
- Demeaning
- Discriminatory
- Oppressive
- Stereotypic

The negative impressions and attitudes conveyed in those expressions could be interpreted, based on conversational implicature, through recourse to social and cultural norms. In Nigeria, the cultures are predominantly patriarchal. Patriarchal cultures ascribe stereotypical definitions to masculinity-femininity identities and create expectations based on these definitions. Stereotypically, masculinity roles involve characteristics like decisiveness, assertiveness, determination, and self-confidence, which are power-related and positive traits. On the contrary, stereotypical femininity roles involve characteristics like fragility, vulnerability, weakness, and being emotional, which are considered negative traits.

Gender stereotypes are reflected in diverse activities and skills. For instance, skills that require motor abilities are labelled as masculine, which includes driving motorcars, thereby predisposing the feminine gender to sexism in traffic. Ercan and Ulug (2015: 790) assert that:

> Traffic is one of the most gendered contexts where overt or subtle sexism inevitably takes place. Based on the social, cultural, and economic context where people were introduced to motorcars, driving them, and becoming road users have always been considered as a masculine activity and associated with manhood. In addition, it was clearly contradicting with female gender roles assigned by patriarchal societies. Women were expected to stay within their controlled domestic area instead of driving motorcars that represented freedom and less controlled mobility. Also, more women driving cars meant to take away the male privilege provided by culturally masculinized characteristics of this activity.

Interestingly, in traffic domain, masculinity related characteristics such as being forceful, aggressive, and risk taking are considered brave and positive behaviours. Contrastively, femininity related characteristics in traffic domain such as hesitancy, pausing, caution, or safety behaviours are considered weak and negative. These opposing and stereotypically gender-related traffic behaviours raise the following questions:

- Have the safety behaviours in driving associated with femininity not been misrepresented by the masculine gender as weakness?
- Have the aggressive and risk-taking behaviours in driving associated with masculinity not related to accident involvements?
- Should driving be categorized based on masculinity and femininity?

Essentially, driving is a life skill because it makes life tasks easier such as running errands, school runs, getting to work, shopping, travelling, and more. So, driving skills should not be categorized based on masculinity and femininity, because both genders require the skills for value-added living and progress. In this connection, women should not be demoralized and harassed in traffic based on the careful and cautious moves they make while driving, which are misrepresented as weakness.

To the extent that there is power in words, there is the tendency of some women being moved towards acceptance of the evaluation of femininity as weakness, portrayed in the following expressions uttered by some women:

- I'm a woman Ooooo!
- I be woman Ooooo!
- Na woman I be Ooooo!

The implicature contained in the above expressions is acceptance of the undermining depiction of the feminine gender, which further marginalizes women.

Moreover, misrepresenting the feminine gender by ascribing weakness to women's driving skills causes limitation of potentials of the feminine gender. The resultant effect of such misrepresentation is that some women may be discouraged from engaging in driving skills and hindered from maximizing their value-adding potentials.

Furthermore, demeaning the feminine gender, rather than encouraging and motivating women to do exploits, could lead to undue dependence on men. Consequently, excessive dependence on men could become burdensome on the masculine gender, thereby generating unhealthy disposition and negative attitude towards women. Ultimately, healthy relationships, which are strongly recommended, should be interdependent, without stereotypical misrepresentations.

Combating the Effects of Feminine Gender Misrepresentations

The implications of feminine gender misrepresentations could be averted through adopting certain positive strategies presented as follows:

- The feminine gender should not be addressed with derogatory expressions.
- Positive expressions should be used to motivate the feminine gender to maximize their potential.
- The feminine gender should not internalize negative ascriptions.
- Mutual respect should be accorded to both masculinity and femininity.

Conclusion

From a pragmatic perspective, this research examined some gendered derogatory expressions used in traffic, in Nigeria, to undermine and misrepresent the feminine gender. To the extent that social and contextual level factors project sexism, it is strongly stressed that social and cultural norms should not be used to devalue the feminine gender. Further studies on both masculinity and femininity from diverse perspectives are strongly recommended.

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