



East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences

eajass.eanso.org

Volume 5, Issue 1, 2022

Print ISSN: 2707-4277 | Online ISSN: 2707-4285

Title DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/2707-4285>

ENASO

EAST AFRICAN
NATURE &
SCIENCE
ORGANIZATION

Original Article

Gender Prejudices in Ekegusii Language: A Case of Proverbs/Wise Sayings

Dr. Edinah Gesare Mose, PhD¹

¹ Kenyatta University, P. O. Box, 83844, Nairobi, Kenya.

* Correspondance ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3117-4364> ; email : gesaremose@gmail.com.

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.5.1596>

Date Published: ABSTRACT

29 March 2022

Keywords: Gender, Language, Prejudice, Stereotypes, Gender Neutral Language.

The advent of the twentieth and the twenty first century has seen languages embrace gender neutrality consciously and these changes in languages have contributed to gender equality. In this regard, the power of languages cannot be ignored in shaping people's social constructions and their roles in societies. Studies have indicated that languages have the power to create and enforce gender determinism and the marginalisation of the feminine gender. Currently, both English and French have embraced inclusivity, whereby there is a deliberate attempt to move away from the use of the masculine as the default form for nouns, to the use of gender-neutral words. This may not be the case for many other languages of the world. That is why this article investigated the use of prejudiced language in Ekegusii paying particular attention to proverbs or wise sayings. Specifically, the article investigated the gender inferences, the roles and the stereotypical constructions in the proverbs or the wise sayings. It also investigated the effect of these gender inferences on the users' perceptions in constructing their identities as men or women. The Social Constructionism Theory guided the analysis while a descriptive field linguistic design was used. Judgemental sampling was then used to sample proverbs from the Ekegusii dictionary and thereafter analysed them to determine the gender inferences, the roles, and the perceived gender constructions. The findings revealed that the figurative language used in these proverbs had underlying gendered prejudiced language that perpetuates historical patriarchal hierarchy that denotes men as norm. Further, the gendered prejudiced language outlines roles that influence members of the society to conform to specific societal expectations in line with their gender therefore forming stereotypes. Proverbs or wise sayings mirror essentially, a culture of a given people. Their continued use indicates one's prowess in a given language and it is deemed prestigious. Therefore, it is hoped that the findings herein will awaken the users on the gendered ideologies in some of the proverbs so that even as they use them, they may conform to the modern trends of gender-neutral language.

APA CITATION

Mose, E. G. (2022). Gender Prejudices in Ekegusii Language: A Case of Proverbs/Wise Sayings. *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 5(1), 41-47. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.5.1.596>

CHICAGO CITATION

Mose, Edinah Gesare. 2022. "Gender Prejudices in Ekegusii Language: A Case of Proverbs/Wise Sayings". *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences* 5 (1), 41-47. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.5.1.596>.

HARVARD CITATION

Mose, E. G. (2022) "Gender Prejudices in Ekegusii Language: A Case of Proverbs/Wise Sayings", *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 5(1), pp. 41-47. doi: 10.37284/eajass.5.1.596.

IEEE CITATION

E. G. Mose. "Gender Prejudices in Ekegusii Language: A Case of Proverbs/Wise Sayings", *EAJASS*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 41-47, Mar. 2022.

MLA CITATION

Mose, Edinah Gesare. "Gender Prejudices in Ekegusii Language: A Case of Proverbs/Wise Sayings". *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, Vol. 5, no. 1, Mar. 2022, pp. 41-47, doi:10.37284/eajass.5.1.596.

INTRODUCTION

Languages form the means by which human beings articulate their ideas and communicate to each other. Prewit-Freilino *et al.* (2011) argue that as long as languages have existed, the differentiation between male and female have always been present in them. Therefore, languages of the world distinguish gender and what varies is the degree of this distinction. Generally, then, languages of the world can be grouped to three broad categories: gendered, natural gender, and genderless languages (Prewit-Freilino *et al.*, 2011). For gendered languages their nouns are always assigned either a feminine or masculine as well as neuter. Example of languages in this category include; German, French and Hebrew. On the other hand, natural gender languages distinguish gender using pronouns such as he or she and most nouns have no grammatical gender marking. Ekegusii, a Bantu language spoken in Kenya and classified as E42 by Guthrie (1967), belongs to this category. Finally, genderless languages, completely lack grammatical gender distinction in the nouns of their languages. However, whether languages are gendered, natural gender, or genderless does not necessarily translate to gender equity in the linguistic societies.

Evidently, languages reflect the culture and enhance the survival of the stereotypes within the societies of the speakers. Lakoff (2003) illustrating this cites the English language when referring to women and men with power which ordinarily is the same behaviour. That English has various words which describe women who are interested in power and this presupposes the

inappropriateness of the attitude. They include shrew and bitches among the more polite ones. There are no equivalents for men. On the other hand, men who fail to dominate their women are denoted as henpecked and pussy-whipped presupposing negative connotations. Given this power that language has in shaping social stereotypes about gender, linguists have long advocated for the change of gendered prejudiced language to neutral language. A case in point is Norway, which has actively reformed its languages to reflect a more genderless outlook (Gabriel & Gygas, 2008). Martyna (1980) observes that gendered language can have effects on people's social judgments, decisions, and behaviour; therefore, there is need to rally behind change in language so as to curtail social inequalities.

How then can changes be initiated to language? One of the ways by which language change can be initiated is by formal instruction. In this regard, proverbs and folktales have been used as forms of instruction to young people (both men and women). In fact, most proverbs bear warnings to young people and the consequences they may suffer if they do contrary. The proverb teachings have different expectations about the way men and women should conduct themselves in society. This article investigated the use of gendered prejudiced language in Ekegusii's proverbs or wise sayings. Specifically, it investigated the gender inferences, the roles and the stereotypical constructions in the proverbs or the wise sayings fostering negative or positive connotations that influence behaviour. It also investigated the effect of these gender inferences on the users'

perceptions in constructing their identities as men or women.

There is paucity of research on gender mediated language. Siegal and Okamoto (2003) analyse textbook language on stereotypical images of Japanese men and women. In fact, men are given high-status roles, such as professors and supervisors, while women are assigned subordinate roles, such as being house-wives and secretaries. Further, there is no office situation whereby a woman gives an order or instruction nor is there a situation where a husband shares housework with his wife. Hence, the textbooks reinforce the traditional gender stratification, while ignoring the diversity and change in gender roles in contemporary Japan.

Prewit-Freilino *et al.* (2011) is yet another study. They examine differences in gender equality between countries with gendered, natural gender, and genderless language systems. Out of 111 countries investigated, Prewit-Freilino *et al.* reveal that where gendered languages are used, they positively correlate with more gender inequality compared to countries with natural gender or genderless languages. This article suggests that when conscious efforts are made to make language gender neutral, this can have a positive impact on gender equity in society. Similar results are reported by Jakiela and Ozier (2017) who report that gender languages reduce women's labour force participation and perpetuates support for unequal treatment of women and men in society.

Children respond to gender stereotyping through language at a very young age. Robertson and Murachver (2003) established that children adjusted their language when interacting with either a male or female experimenter. In addition, the boys' conversational behaviour related to their beliefs about adhering to gender stereotypes. Perhaps this realignment of language could be planted in children intentionally or unintentionally. Johnson and Young (2002) while studying televised ads for toys directed to children observe that in boy-oriented ads, the voice-overs were exclusively male, and in the girl-oriented ads, they were female. That verb elements in the boys' ads contained more elements emphasizing action, competition, destruction, agency, and control. Girl's ads contained more verb elements emphasizing limited activity, feelings, and nurturing. Finally, use of "power" words was

prevalent in boys' ads but lacking in girls' ads. This study indicates that language use be it in ads or the general environment socialize children towards gender stereotypes that are accepted in societies. Evidently, the reviewed studies indicate that consciously or unconsciously men and women in their use of language inculcate gendered prejudiced language in the society users. This can happen through formal instructions or use of generally gendered language in society. This in the long run impacts on the gendered roles that segregate distinctly men and women as well as subjugating the female gender.

METHODOLOGY

This article which investigated the gender prejudiced inferences, the roles and the stereotypical constructions in the proverbs or the wise sayings in Ekegusii is part of a conference paper presented at the International Mother Language Day (IMLD) in Kitui (February, 2019). A descriptive linguistic fieldwork design was used. This design allows for the investigation of the nature of a language by collecting primary data from written native speaker resources (Chelliah & Reuse, 2011). Besides, data used in this article was derived from the Ekegusii dictionary using judgmental sampling. The data was then analysed to identify the prejudiced gender inferences, the roles, and the perceived gender constructions. Further, the principles of the social constructionism theory by Berger and Luckmann (1966) were used to justify the findings. According to this theory, all meaning is socially created to an extent that it feels natural yet it is not. In particular, the language a given society uses abides by specific rules which determines how the language users perceive and understand the world. Consequently, if it is biased it is bound to emphasize certain things while ignoring others; hence, constraining what is expressed as well as the perceptions formed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Gender Inferences in Ekegusii Proverbs

Data from Ekegusii proverbs indicated that there were open inferences to either men or women and there was nothing like the use of language that is gender neutral. An illustration of these is presented here:

1. (a) *Abakungu mbaya menwa yabasarirwe*
(Women are good only that their mouths let them down)

In 1(a), reference is made to women's goodness; only that their mouths let them down. Implying that women talk too much. There is no equivalence of this proverb for the male gender. The traditional assumption is that women do most of the talking, yet it is usually about nothing important. This subjugates women to silence implying that the accepted view is when one talks less.

1. (b) *Kobeka Mokeira ibega inkebera kwerentereire* (Keeping Mokeira close to you is like bring upon yourself a boil)

Similarly, 1(b) makes reference to 'Mokeira' a woman's name. That if you keep her close you will be bringing trouble for yourself; in this case trouble is equated to a boil. This proverb is intended to warn the male gender or any other person to be weary of people who cannot be trusted, since they will eventually lead one to trouble. Of important to note is the reference to a female name 'Mokeira' yet this is a warning to everyone. Therefore, this equates women to trouble.

1. (c) *Moiseke onyabagambi bange tanyagosoka*
(A young woman with many advisors will not get married)

1(c) makes reference to 'Omoiseke' a young unmarried woman. That if she listens to many advisors, she will eventually not get married. Marriage is a union involving both male and female. Why a reference has to be made to only the woman is a question one can ask. We can only infer that this reference was intended to deny women the authority to question the intended suitor. And if they challenged this hegemony, the consequence will be to remain unmarried, something that was frowned upon in the traditional society

1. (d) *Mokungu obande nyabarati ebweri torusia mokorogoto agage insoni chitamere magachi otangange tureti binyunsa bire mioro*
(Somebody's wife is like a cow in the shade do not you remove the barrier or else she will be loose and shame will befall you at the elder's court)

Lastly, 1(d) makes reference to a woman being compared to 'Nyabarati' a name given to a cow. That somebody's wife is like a cow in the shade which you 'the man' should not let loose lest shame will befall you in the elder's court. This reference to immorality targets women, instead of a general reference to immoral behaviour and its consequences for both men and women.

These references to women in Ekegusii proverbs generally demean women. From the proverbs presented in 1a, b, c, and d it is clear the proverbs contain warning messages to members of the society. However, instances which make references to women are not only demeaning but discriminatory against women. This contributes to forming of stereotypes which are definitely very negative and they end up prejudicing people in society towards women. Similarly, these findings echo the social constructionism theory's views that the language used in society contains views that are biased which end up influencing societal perceptions to the extent that it feels natural or the 'norm'. In this case, these references made to women like; they are too talkative or they are trouble makers, are deemed normal yet they are not.

Roles and Stereotypical Constructions in Ekegusii Proverbs or Wise Sayings

Data from Ekegusii proverbs revealed that societal expectations on how men and women should conduct themselves was very different based on their role expectations constructed from the stereotypical beliefs. In both actions of men and women; there was that which was considered appropriate and inappropriate. This is illustrated in the following proverbs:

2. (a) *Ritinge ndiamochie mogare* (Ritinge needs a wide/ rich homestead)

'Ritinge' is a woman who has separated from her husband and she is cohabiting with another man. 'ndiamochie mogare' means such a woman can only be sustained in a home or a husband who has money- literary a big homestead. This proverb warns men to be weary of such women since this union is solely dependent on money availability. Traditionally, perhaps even now, this woman cannot be married legally because she belongs to another man. A number of things can be noted from this proverb. First, Ekegusii has no equivalence of a lexeme that describes a man who has separated from his wife. In fact, the closest

describes a man whose wife has died. Secondly, the role and natural expectation of society upon women is that, they ought to stick to their marriages domestic abuse or any other challenge that could be facing that marriage notwithstanding, lest they will be frowned upon and they will never belong. This proverb then denies women express authority to move from one marriage union to another, something a man can do and society views it as normal.

2. (b) *Basacha mbaniberani, na bakungu mbaiborerani* (Men raise property for each other whilst women raise children for their fellow women)

Accumulation of property or wealthy naturally brings power to wield and control others. From the proverb, men are referred to as assisting one another to accumulate wealth while women ought to give birth and assist one another to bring up the children. Economic empowerment is very crucial in bringing gender equity. Here women are relegated to only child bearing; whereas society expects men to cooperate with each when looking for and accumulating wealthy. This role expectation by society reflects the power discrepancy between men and women, therefore denying women the game changer for gender equity. According Jakiela and Ozier (2017), a gendered language reduces women's opportunity to active participation in the labour force therefore denying women economic empowerment which leads to gender equity.

2. (c) *Ensinyo managokwanwa mbamura etabwati* (A despised neighbourhood has no brave men)

Bravery or courage is a virtue that is admired by all. Unfortunately, in this proverb it is equated to men. That if a neighbourhood is despised, then it does not have brave men. And if it does have men, then they are 'sissy' like no wonder they are despised. Therefore, society naturally expects men to be brave and take care of their neighbourhoods. The distinction here does not entirely make any reference to women yet they are part of society and any society's security is very important. This then delegates women to trivial or lesser issues that society does not consider paramount. Similar to this proverb is another that says:

2. (d) *Nguru cha momura nchogu egwati mbara* (A man's strength is like an elephant splitting wood)

This proverb glorifies a young man's energy equating it to an elephant splitting wood. Whereas, strength is synonymous with courage or bravery no reference is made to a young woman. This therefore indicates that society does not expect them to display strength. However, there are aspects that society expects women to display. They are captured in the following proverbs:

2. (e) *Buya bwomosubati/ ekieni kwomosubati nsigiti etaratwa* (The beauty of a woman is like an ewe that has not had a young one)

2. (f) *Omokungu omuya mbokano botingire bogaiika* (A good wife is like a well-tuned harp)

In 2(e), the beauty of a woman is compared to an ewe that has not had a young one while 2(f), makes reference of a good wife to a musical instrument 'harp' that is well tuned. Whereas bravery is equated to young men, beauty is equated to women especially those who are young and have not given birth. This is very discriminatory considering that such roles eventually impact on the society's social perceptions and determinations.

Effects of Gender Influences on Users' Perceptions in Constructing Identities as Men or Women

When words presuppose negative connotations for men or women who do contrary, there is a tendency of people to generally comply to what is acceptable therefore leading to the construction of acceptable societal identities of men and women. This is illustrated in the following proverb:

3. (a) *Nyamokungu omo aye, mosiereku okobera tobunera abagaka chinkore* (You who has one wife sit close to the door lest you break the elders' drinking straw)

The proverb derides a man who has married just one wife; that he should sit close to the entrance. In other words, he is not supposed to dine with the elders who according to society are respectable. In this instance, there is a deliberate attempt to encourage men to be polygamous a situation which subjugates women. Traditionally, those who married only one wife were demeaned to have failed to dominate "their" wives. The identity that men will generally form from such proverb is that they ought to marry many women.

3. (b) *Omomura ingetii akororerwa* (The ability of a young man is seen on the battle ground)

'*Omomura*' is a young man whose ability will only be judged not at home but in the battle field. This makes young men to construct their identities that they ought to be strong, brave, and adventurous so that whoever who is cowardly is derided upon. Whereas identity construction for men is chiselled around physical energetic attributes, those for women centre around behaviour and natural beauty. This is illustrated by the following proverbs:

3. (c) *Omoiseke omobe momura oare aganyete* (A bad girl waits for a distant suitor)

A well-behaved girl will be married to nearby suitor while a bad one will have to wait for the one who comes from far since he does not know her. This proverb implores women to behave well so that they will have an opportunity to be married nearer their homes; something considered a privilege. Societal expectations then shape women to mind their behaviour whose consequences are outlined.

3. (d) *Omokungu omobe nsagasaga ekobongia buna amaemba 'nkongo* (A bad or an ill-mannered woman is like the rustling wind that gathers everything)

This proverb compares an ill-mannered/bad woman to the rustling of wind especially the one that blows forcefully, picking anything on its way. It implies that a careless woman can unnecessarily cause strife among people. Naturally then, society shapes women to be very submissive and being talkative and assertive is suppressed. This docility that is encouraged among women subjugates them and does not in way bring about gender equity. According to the social constructivism theory, the language that a given society uses determines how that society perceives and understands the world. By making open references to women and expressing the roles men and women ought to play, the Ekegusii proverbs or wise sayings foster the formation stereotypical perceptions which are discriminatory against women. Moreover, they promote gender inequality.

CONCLUSION

Conclusively, it can be noted that the Ekegusii proverbs or wise sayings are loaded with prejudiced gender inferences. This inferences,

mainly presuppose very negative connotations on women therefore subjugating and relegating them to subordinate roles while exalting men and maintaining the patriarchal systems. There is need therefore to consciously instigate language change that will bring about gender awareness so that such controversial language in proverbs or wise saying is revised or completely done away with so as to promote gender sensitive language.

REFERENCES

- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Anchor.
- Bosire, K., M. & Machogu, G., K. (2013). *Ekegusii English Dictionary*. The Republic of Kenya: Ekegusii Encyclopaedia Project.
- Chelliah, L. S. & Reuse, W. (2011). *Handbook of descriptive linguistic fieldwork*. New York: Springer.
- Gabriel, U., & Gyax, P. (2008). Can societal language amendments change gender representation? The case of Norway. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 49(5), 451- 457. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9450.2008.00650.x>
- Guthrie, M. (1967). *Comparative Bantu: an introduction to the comparative linguistics and prehistory of the Bantu languages* (Vol. 3). Gregg.
- Jakiela, p. & Ozier, O. (2017). Gendered Language. *World Bank Development Research Group*. BREAD.
- Johnson, L. F. & Young, K. (2002). Gendered voices in children's Television advertising. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 19(4), 461-480.
- Lakoff, R. (2003). Language, gender, and politics: Putting "women" and "power" in the same sentence. *The handbook of language and gender*, 161, 78.
- Martyna, W. (1980). Beyond the "he/man" approach: The case for nonsexist language. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 5(3), 482- 493. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1086/493733>

- Prewitt-Freilino, J. L., Caswell, T. A., & Laakso, E. K. (2012). The gendering of language: A comparison of gender equality in countries with gendered, natural gender, and genderless languages. *Sex roles*, 66(3), 268-28. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/511199-011-0083-5>
- Robertson, K. & Murachver, T. (2003). Children's speech accommodation to gendered language styles. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 22(3), 321-333
- Siegal, M. & Okamoto, S. (2003). Towards reconceptualizing the teaching and learning of gendered speech styles in Japanese as a foreign language. *Japanese Language and Literature*, 37(1), 49-66