

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE USE OF LINGUISTIC FORMS: A STUDY OF NOLLYWOOD MOVIES

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Abstract:

Many sociolinguistic studies contrast women's and men's language use. Differences in the way that men and women use language have long been of interest in the study of discourse. In this study, gender differences in language use were examined in Nollywood films using Robin Lakoff's model which states that women's speech style is defiant and inferior to men's style. This investigation has basically consisted in identifying, describing and analyzing two Nollywood films in which instances of intensifiers and minimal responses found in the conversations of both male and female characters are noticeable by applying a descriptive qualitative method of research. The findings reveal that intensifiers and minimal responses are used by both male and female characters, but males use minimal responses more, not to show weakness, but to buttress and reinforce their points while females use intensifiers more because of the social role attached to them.

Keywords: Language, gender, Nollywood, intensifiers, minimal responses

Introduction

Language is central to human affairs. It serves as a vital tool for communication and as a primary means of constructing and maintaining the society. Language also encodes and transmits cultural meanings and values in our society. People's socio-cultural behaviours, thoughts and attitudes are reflected in their use of language. In other words, society's distinction between men and women is reflected in their language, for instance, if a male tends to speak the

language used by females, he is considered to be crossing the boundary. According to Tannen (1995, p. 138), “communication is not as simple as saying what you mean. How you say what you mean is crucial, and differs from one person to the next because using language is a learned behaviour; how we talk and listen is deeply influenced by cultural experience”. It is generally accepted that men and women do not use and interpret language in the same way since they are believed to have grown up in two subcultures, thereby having two different styles of speaking that show their social status. Gender, as the case may be, refers to the culture and social division between men and women in which terms such as masculinity and femininity are used to differentiate one sex from the other. However, it is a social construct where specific social and cultural roles that men and women are to follow are outlined. Coates (1998, p. 89) claims that “gender is not something we are born with, and not something we have, but something we do or something we perform”. Gender, as the socially constructed characteristic of women and men, deals with personal, societal and cultural perceptions of sexuality. Unlike sex, it does not have a basis in science; it is based on societal constructions and belief systems that deal with masculinity and femininity.

Intensifiers are adverbs or adverbial phrases that strengthen the meaning of other expressions. They heighten the emphasis on the word or phrase they are modifying. They also express degree of certainty and politeness. Intensifiers act as signals and have been classified as ‘boosters’ and ‘strengtheners’. Some of the examples are : very, so, just, too, really, little, rather, quite, pretty, awfully, terribly, extremely, slightly, utterly, highly, horribly, totally, completely, absolutely, etc. Intensifiers are divided into

separate categories, though this division varies. In this study, the one proposed by Quirk et al (1985) is preferred. Minimal responses, on the other hand, involve brief feedback or comments mainly used by listeners during a conversation interaction. They are the brief sounds people make such as ‘hmm’, ‘mhmm’, ‘yeah’, ‘yes’, ‘mmm’, ‘uhhuh’, ‘ahh’, ‘ehm’, ‘ehh’, etc., which are used as positive feedback for the speaker by listeners. Minimal responses are also known as back-channel speech. When used in a conversation, they show active listening, interest and also signs of support work. This is to say that they can demonstrate agreement, signal understanding, demand clarification or even show surprise. Thus the movie, as a genre of a fictional character, may be said to be one of the most suitable and appropriate media for expressing, examining and exploiting the richness and complicity of gender differences. This may be the main reason for the widespread interest in movies among people of various social groups globally, as aptly observed by Bleichenbacher (2008). Just as in real life or non-fiction, gender differences tend to be mirrored in the discourse of movie characters as determined by their ethnic, linguistic or cultural backgrounds or affiliations. It is also believed that while meaning is constructed through interaction between different people and their relation to objects and other people, differences also vary according to gender. This is to say that meaning is created through language depending on how people use concepts and what the meanings of these concepts are. Therefore, cultures and beliefs are learned through films.

Nollywood has been the vehicle driving the Nigerian film industry. Its movies are produced in English and Nigerian indigenous languages which are made up of three

major languages, Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba, and more than 300 other minority languages. Gender differences in the use of intensifiers and minimal responses in the selected movies could provide substantive evidence that underlies differences in the speech of male and female movie characters because movies, according to, Aitchison (1998), form an aspect of media that conceptualizes world events and situations which people have accepted as a means of gathering information about what is happening around the world. However, women and men differ, not only in terms of their physical appearance, but also in terms of their speech. Theorists in gender and language research conclude that gender differences cannot be discussed simply in terms of the different linguistic behaviour of women and men as groups (Mills, 2000). The differences have to be analyzed in terms of the various strategies which women and men adopt in particular circumstances and communicative acts. Realizing this disparity between women's and men's speech, there is a need to pursue a research in this field to learn more about it. Thus, the primary goal of this study is to examine the possible gender differences in the language use of male and female characters in selected Nollywood movies with the intention of analyzing the intensifiers and minimal responses of women's and men's speech. In other words, intensifiers and minimal responses are examined to see if women use them more than men or not and the functions of these discourse features in different social contexts are also investigated and resolved using Nollywood movies as a case study.

Statement of the Problem

Gender discourses have been on the front burner for several decades, especially the issue of women interacting

differently from men. These differences in gender communication can be noted to reflect in most male and female discourse in relation to their contexts. From a sociolinguistic perspective, the principal factors behind this gender speech differences can be said to be the imbalance of power between male and female members of the society as well as women and men coming from different sociolinguistic subcultures where they learn to do things with words in a conversation. Much of the research on gender differences have focused on the representation and portrayal of women and men in Nollywood movies. Thus, it appears that there is very little knowledge about how gender difference operates in the language aspect of women and men in Nollywood movies. This leaves a gap to fill. From our observations, it is clear that gender differences in form of intensifiers and minimal responses in the selected movies could provide substantive evidence that underlies differences in the speech of male and female movie characters. This study therefore seeks to answer the following questions:

- i) Do male and female characters in Nollywood movies use intensifiers and minimal responses?
- ii) In what ways do the male characters' use of intensifiers and minimal responses differ from that of the females?
- iii) What are their functions in the movies?

Movies Synopses

Black Men Rock: This movie tells the story of couples' vacation. It follows three sisters (Becky, Nadia and Louisa) and their husbands (Desmond, Melvin and Sly) who go on a family vacation for a week during which they discover that their lives have not been as perfect as they assumed, thereby

revealing each other's hidden secrets which had been locked away for years and coming to terms with their flaws.

Let Karma: This is a story of betrayal, infidelity as well as karma. It mirrors the lives of two couples: Daniel (Blossom Chukwujekwu) and Ene (Aisha Mohammed), and Anthony (Daniel K. Daniel) and Gabby (Bisola Aiyeola). Both women are friends, likewise their husbands who are both cheating on them. Daniel's cheating is as a result of Ene's continuous nagging and need to control her husband because she does not want to be one of those women who do not have control over their husbands. Her need for control is born out of a personal trauma (her Dad's cheating on her Mum). Anthony, on the other hand, is an unrepentant cheat. Karma dealt with both men at the end.

Literature Review

The study of gender differences in the speech of men and women have reflected different views. The major difference between women and men in their style of communication goes to the fact that women and men view the purpose of conversations differently. Research on gender differences has shown that while women use language as a tool to enhance social connections and create relationships, men use language to exert dominance and achieve tangible outcomes (Maltz & Borker (1982) and Wood (1999)). The scholars mentioned above have concluded that men tend to be self-assertive and view conversations as a means towards a tangible outcome, such as obtaining power or dominance whereas women value cooperation. According to Mulac *et al* (2001), women are expected to use communication to enhance social connections and relationships, while men use language to enhance social dominance. In other words, men give orders while women often soften their demands and

statements. Climate (1997), supporting this view, believes that women generally use speech to develop and maintain relationships. They use language to achieve intimacy. According to Coates (2004), women's language is used in a cooperative and polite way whereas men's language is used in a competitive and impolite way. This is in line with Tannen's (1995, p. 41) point of view which says that "men use language to emphasize the status". She goes further to say that women "speak and hear a language of connection and intimacy while men speak and hear a language of status and independence. Communication is more or less cross-cultural, and males and females are genetically unsuited to communicate successfully with each other; we learn to use language as we grow up and since we grow up in different geographical areas, have different religious beliefs, class backgrounds, etc., all these lead to different ways of speaking" (Tannen 1995, p. 42). In this order of ideas, popular works by Deborah Tannen show that while men view conversations as a way to establish and maintain status and dominance in relationships, women see the purpose of conversation to create and foster an intimate bond with men by talking about topical problems and issues they are communally facing.

There are scholars who argue that women use less powerful speech: they tend to swear less, speak more politely, and use more tag questions (Lakoff, 1975). Thorne and Henley (1975) conclude that women also tend to interrupt less than men do because of their perceived lower status to men which is as a result of societal norms that enforce this gender status hierarchy. Scholars have suggested that these gender differences in communication styles put women at a disadvantage when interacting with others because they speak more tentatively than men, who

are known to speak more assertively, thus leaving the impression that men are more confident and capable as leaders (Lakoff, 1975).

There have also been findings from different scholars which indicate changes and differences found in the language use of both males and females. For instance, uncertainty verb phrases have been found more often in women's writing (Mulac & Lundell, 1994). Aitchison(1998) claims that women are more conservative when they talk by replacing imperatives or direct sentences with questions, for example, 'Are you coming with me?', she answers, 'Do you want me to come?'. The reason for this could be that women use this style to avoid provoking arguments and outrage. Women also use more standard forms than men which are believed that it is because they are expected to be ladylike, so they have to behave more politely than men. Men and women also differ in their relations towards others in society because while women strive to be more social in their interactions with others, men value their independence (Eagly, 1987). This shows that, in general, women are more social and emotional in their interactions with others, whereas men are more independent and unemotionally attached in conversations. The most popular explanation given for the obvious differences is that the different verbal skills held by females and males are reflections of the different conditions of their gender in the society. According to Ning & Dui (2010), men and women also differ in topic selection. Whereas politics and economics are major topics selected by men during conversations, education and family are the major topics selected by females. They are also of the opinion that men usually talk much more in public communication than women. In this order of idea, Wenjing (2012, p. 220) states that "there is no

rule for female in English pronunciation, vocabulary structure and syntax, but the male and female differences in vocabulary is often encountered in daily life ... Women always use a word with exaggerated significance whereas men use the plain words to enhance the effect". Since female and male speakers of a language have different experiences, social roles and personal needs specific to their culture, it can only be expected that they develop different strategies and skills of speech to operate within and cope with sociolinguistic and cultural requirements in their society. Many of these gender differences in communication styles, mentioned above, make women appear subordinate to men, suggesting they should be viewed as second-class to men.

Several studies have examined the issue of gender differences empirically and have lent substantial support to it, but very few have been done on the issue of gender differences in Nollywood films. Baranauskiene & Adminiene (2012) examine the differences between the speech of women and men in Hemingway's fiction and typify the linguistic strategies representing female and male dominance or powerlessness in different social contexts and reveal that female use hedges more than men and also that gender differences in language occur because of status-conscious society, cross-cultural differences, misunderstandings of the intent of the other sex, the dominant role of male position in society and on different linguistic strategies acquired by female and male subcultures in culture and social organization. In a study to uncover the differences in linguistic features in the speech of men and women, Subon (2013) reveals that women use more polite forms of address than men. They also ask more questions and use more humour than men. Men, on the

other hand, use slightly more of fillers, hedges and affirmatives than women. He also concludes that men's conversations focus on the topic of doing things whereas women centre on the topics of home, self, feelings and affiliation with others. Osoba and Oluwamusani, on the other hand, offer an analysis of gender discourse of Yoruba male and female movie characters where their genderlect was examined and investigated in terms of their use of minimal responses, intensifiers, hedges, tag question, polite and taboo words, and reveal that the differences in the usage of male and female movie characters are determined by several sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic and discourse features within the context of situation or interaction in the Yoruba milieu. In this regard, the researcher attempts to examine the gender differences in language use in the speech of women and men using Nollywood movies by selecting intensifiers and minimal responses as the basis of analysis.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the theoretical orientation of Robin Lakoff as it offers methodologies for the evaluation of the films. The reason is to attempt an analysis of gender differences in the use of intensifiers and minimal responses in the speech of women and men as seen in the film narratives in relation to the context of usage. Lakoff (1975) was one of the pioneers in language and gender studies who claimed that there are differences between men and women's language and that this difference was as a result of language reflecting society. She labelled women's speech as deficient, and examined the representation of women in language and concluded that men were defined in terms of what they did in the world while women were defined in terms of whom they were associated with. This is to say that

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something was wrong with women's behaviour and this required remedy so that women would be treated equally with men in society. In her book, 'Language and Women's Place', she identifies ten features of women's speech. They are

Hedges – you know, you see, sort of.

Tag Questions – It's not right, is it?

Intensifiers – just, so.

Empty Adjectives – charming, cute, divine.

Rising Intonation on declaratives – It's really good.

Precise colour terms – aquamarine, magenta.

Hypercorrect grammar – consistent use of standard verb forms.

Superpolite forms – indirect requests, euphemisms.

Avoidance of strong swear words – my goodness, fudge.

Emphatic stress – It was a BRILLIANT performance. (cited in Holmes, 2008, p. 298).

Here, she states that these differences are as a result of how girls and boys are raised in different ways, and also concludes that females are taught how to sound like 'ladies'. This book was criticized because it was said to lack empirical basis, but these features she categorized as women's language continued to appear in numerous later research. However, this study tests the universality of Lakoff's claims by examining two of her women's language

features, intensifiers and minimal responses in the language of Nollywood characters.

Methodology

This study is a descriptive qualitative where it is intended to describe the case of the study by words or sentences rather than numbers. Thus, the purpose of using this approach is to explore the gender differences in communication styles of men and women in the selected Nollywood films. The subject of this study is male and female characters in these movies. This study emphasizes the use of intensifiers and minimal responses by people of the same age, of different age, of different status, and so on. The data is taken during the conversations between male and female characters. The instrument of the data is the researcher herself because she collected the data and analyzed the data. Series of films were viewed on Nollywood movie industry and two were selected as data for this study. They are *Black Men Rock* produced by Nneka Adams (2018) and *Let Karma* produced by Aisha Mohammed (2018). The selection was based on the fact that these movies contain scenes involving verbal exchanges between female and male characters that depict love, relationship, social and family life as their thematic centrality. Listed below are the stages involved in analyzing those data. The movies were collected from a friend through Xender and watched severally with keen attention. Notes were taken of all that was heard and spoken between female and male characters. A comprehensive list of all the intensifiers and minimal responses used by both genders was compiled. The list was analyzed in an attempt to know the gender that used these linguistic forms more and their functions in the movies.

Analysis

This paper runs a qualitative analysis of two movies, namely, *Black Men Rock* and *Let Karma*. The data obtained from the conversations between a male and a female were analyzed by noting down the intensifiers and minimal responses to come up with the findings of the study. The results obtained from this data analysis helped to answer the research questions.

Table 1

Black Men Rock	Males	Females
Intensifiers	43	59
Minimal Responses	13	10

Table 2

Let Karma	Males	Females
Intensifiers	36	43
Minimal Responses	21	14

Table 3

Total Numbers for both Movies	Males	Females
Intensifiers	43 + 36	59 + 43 = 102

	=79	
Minimal Responses	13 + 21 = 34	10 + 14 = 24

Discussion of Findings:

The results of the findings from this study are discussed in line with the research questions that were raised at the beginning of the study.

Research Question 1: Do the male and female characters in Nollywood movies use intensifiers and minimal responses? As shown in the tables above, it is evident that both gender used intensifiers and minimal responses in their conversations in both movies although females used intensifiers more while males used minimal responses more.

Research Question 2: In what ways do the male characters' use of intensifiers and minimal responses differ from that of the females?

There is a significant difference in how women and men use both intensifiers and minimal responses in the movies. From our analysis in table 3, women appear to use intensifiers more than men in both movies as they were at the receiving ends, that is, most of them had to wait for their males to finish talking before they could respond. Intensifiers such as really, so, very, nicely, actually, probably, apparently are more commonly used by females. They express insecurity, uncertainty and willingness to ease communication in order to show that they agree with men’s opinion in avoidance of conflict. For instance,
From *Black Men Rock*,

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Becky: I'm sorry. Please I'm sorry. Desmond, I miss you. I'm sorry.

Desmond: How could you do something like this to me? The child, is it a boy or a girl?

Becky: Ehm, it's a boy. Actually, you've met him. Destiny.

Desmond: Destiny?

Becky: (nods her head in agreement)

Desmond: Can I adopt him so that I can have one son and two daughters?

Becky: Desmond, thank you. Thank you so much. I'm so sorry.

From *Let Karma*,

Ene: Oh, hi darling.

Daniel: What are you watching?

Ene: It's DSR.

Daniel: They don't speak English naa. Can we at least watch something where they speak English that we'll understand?

Ene: Ehm, sorry baby. The subscription expired.

Daniel: You want me to stay at home yet you don't have the decency to pay for the damned cable (reaching to the door).

Ene: Baby, baby, I'm so so sorry for stressing you out. Okay, drive safely.

Minimal responses, on the other hand, were produced by both genders during their conversations, but the males used them more often than the females. The above illustrations can be seen in the conversations below.

From *Black Men Rock*,

Desmond: Guys, I wanna apologize for what happened earlier on. Today has been one horrible experience for me.

Melvin: It's okay, guy. We're glad you are better.

Desmond: Yeah, I won't be here if I wasn't better. Ehm, they took me to their resort clinic and I'm fine.

Nadia: That's great.

Louisa: Very heart-lifting.

Sly: Well, I think you should be more careful with what you eat next time.

This is one of the most embarrassing experiences one could encounter on a trip.

Nadia: Runny stomach, very terrible. It could leave one very shattered.

Desmond: Yeah, you can say that loud, my dear. I'm not gonna wish that on any of my enemies.

Sly: Well, I wanna officially welcome everyone here for the vacation. It has always been my wife's wish for this to happen, but I kept procrastinating it due to my very busy schedule, but I'm happy we're finally here. So ladies and gentlemen, there's so much fun out there and I say we go catch it.

Becky: Yeah

Louisa: Yeah

From *Let Karma,*

Michael: Where were you last night?

Nnenna: Michael, what are you doing here? How many times do we have to do this?

I mean you can't just barge into my house like you own it.

Michael: You said you were at the bush bar and I sent a car to get you, but you were nowhere to be found.

Nnenna: Michael, I am in charge of my own life and not you. Where I was last night is none of your business.

Michael: (seizing her two hands) I said I will not just ask you again, where were you last night?

Nnenna: Fine, fine, I was at the bar, but I left as soon as I got your call.

Michael: Why are like this, eh? Listen, campus was a little bit heated up last night and

I needed to be sure you were safe, that's all. I need you to understand that you are my life and I love you so much. I just wanted to be sure you're not stepping out on me because you are stuck in this relationship, don't jeopardize it.

Therefore, intensifiers and minimal responses, as used by females in the movies, indicate their submission and unassertiveness. They were used by females to maintain interaction and understanding while their male counterparts use them to show assertiveness, transmit information and may be, offer advice.

Research Question 3: What are the functions of these linguistic forms in the movies?

Generally, it is believed that women use language to enhance social connections and create relationships whereas men use language to achieve tangible outcomes such as offering solutions to problems to avoid further seemingly unnecessary discussions of interpersonal problems. In this research, intensifiers are used by both genders in these movies, but they are used more by females in both movies. As mentioned earlier, from Quirk et al's classification of intensifiers, it is observed that the intensifiers used in these movies function as emphasizees (adverbs that emphasize the intensity of a verb, adverb or adjective such as apparently,

just, actually, really), amplifiers (adverbs that increase the intensity of the words they are modifying such as totally, absolutely, badly, too, so, very), and downtoners (adverbs that de-emphasize the intensity of a verb, adverb or adjective such as almost, just, a little, rather, barely, eventually). This can be seen in their conversations below.

In *Black Men Rock*,

Nadia: Runny stomach, *very* terrible. It could leave one *very* shattered. (Acts as an amplifier)

Nadia: I'm *really* sorry about last night. (Acts as an emphasize)

Melvin: My dear, that guy was not promoted. See, he earns *just* #35000 per month and your sister earns *just* #50000. (Acts as a downtoner)

Nadia: But I thought Becky said he was *recently* promoted to the position of a General Manager? (Acts as an amplifier)

Becky: Oh you want Nadia to remind me of how *badly* I married? (acts as an amplifier)

From *Let Karma*,

Ene: Gabby was here earlier today and *apparently* she exchanged her car with Tony. (act as an emphasize)

Anthony: You are the love of my life and I would do *absolutely* anything to make you happy. (Acts as an amplifier)

Gabby: ...Besides, it is *barely* a year old. (Acts as a downtoner)

Daniel: All I'm saying is that I've had a *very* stressful day and I'm entitled to rest. (acts as an amplifier)

Nnenna: You are *really* a great guy, you know. (Acts as an emphasize)

Anthony: A woman can never have *too* many diamonds.
(Acts as an amplifier)

Ene: I'm *so* sorry for stressing you out. (Acts as an amplifier)

Anthony: Yeah, she will, but when I *eventually* find one.
(Acts as a downtoner)

Minimal responses, as used in these movies, show that the interlocutor was attentive to or in agreement with what was being said. When used in the movies, they never seem to interrupt the flow of the conversation rather they function as indicators of participation in the conversation. In other words, they function as response. For instance, in *Black Men Rock*,

Sly: Oh, hei.

Cheryl: Hi. I see you went to play.

Sly: *Yeah*, I went to exercise.

Cheryl: Keeping fit is good business.

Sly: *Yeah*, and I'm really sorry about last night.

The same thing is applicable to *Let Karma*,

Anthony: ...I'm sorry, Babe. I'm really sorry. I was out with the guys and you know how it is when I'm out with the guys. Look, I was with Chima and Daniel came back into town and I lost track of time.

Gabby: *Hmm*, Daniel is in town. Ene will be so happy.

Anthony: *Yeah*, Ene is happy. As a matter of fact, they are both happy and you, my love, should be happy too, but apparently, you are not...Come sit, let's fix this. So *ehmm*, how about a new set of earrings?

Gabby: Nice try, but you just got me a new set a few days ago.

Anthony: *Hmm*, really. Okay, *ehmm*, how about a new car?

Gabby: Well, I'm still in love with my current car.

Anthony: *Yeah*, I got it this time, a trip to anywhere in the world.

Gabby: *Hmm*, it sounds like a good idea, yea, but I don't know where I'll go to.

From the conversations above, it is clear that both males and females make use of minimal responses to indicate the listener's active participation in the conversation. In other words, minimal responses are used in the movies to show how supportive and actively involved the listener is in the conversation. They serve mainly to indicate participation or agreement.

Conclusion

This study has proved that in mixed conversations, men tend to speak differently from women. The movies depict men as seekers for information and also controllers of the conversation while women are tentative. This is in support of Lakoff's model which states that men's language is competitive whereas women's language is polite and comprises affective functions. The study has also shown that men use minimal responses more often than women do and also that the usage of this by male does not show weakness rather they use them to buttress and reinforce their points. In the corpus under the investigation, the researcher found out that female characters use intensifiers more often than male do. They speak more politely and tend to interrupt less. In fact, they weaken their statements because of their fear of being wrong.

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Filmography

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