On Sociolinguistic Oriented Research on the Relationship between Language and Gender, and the Reality of Gender Condition in Africa

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1.0 Abstract

The relationship between language and gender has been a major research topic in sociolinguistics. It has generated a huge amount of discussion and thought in the last four or so decades. This paper focuses on the work of three famous feminist sociolinguistic researchers, Robin Lakoff, Dale Spender, and Deborah Tannen, who have claimed that language has some connections with gender. The paper argues that some of the claims made in these sociolinguistic oriented researches should be re-evaluated rather than totally discarded. The first part of this paper introduces the study, providing a background to the discussion in the paper. In the second part some of the key questions which sociolinguistic oriented research on language and gender attempt to address are presented. The third part reviews three influential sociolinguistic oriented research on language and gender. Part four concludes the study.

Key words: gender, language, sociolinguistics, and Africa.

1. Introduction

In recent years, there have been some thoughts and discussions on the possible relationships and intersections between language and gender. According to Wardhaugh (2006:315), 'the literature on these issues is now vast; it has been one of the biggest 'growth' areas within sociolinguistics in recent years.' The sociolinguistic research into the possible connections between language and gender began with Robin Lakoff in 1973. Lakoff (1973, 1975) asserts that women's speech style had some linguistic features that mark it as different from men's speech style. Since then, as Alkadi (2012:115) observes, 'a huge amount of exploration has been produced in order to investigate this relationship at various levels which embody the effects of gender on particular language features'. He further observes that these gender-language studies have resulted in fascinating research findings (ibid), which both require further investigation and reflection.

Based on this, this paper reviews the work of three famous feminist sociolinguistic researchers, Robin Lakoff, Dale Spender, and Deborah Tannen on the subject. These researchers have employed sociolinguistic approaches to explore the relationships between language and gender, and have come up with some interesting research outcomes. I argue in the paper that some of the claims made by these authors should be re-evaluated rather than totally discarded. This is important because in the larger African society, boys and girls, men and women are still largely been exposed and subjected to different socialization patterns, which tended to impact on their gendered behaviour, including language use.

2. Sociolinguistic oriented research on the relationship between language and gender

In this section, I provide an introduction to sociolinguistic oriented research on language and gender, which represents the first major attempt towards exploring the connections gender, is assumed to have with language; and which have influenced subsequent research on the subject. However, before examining the studies let me briefly introduce some of the key questions concerning the possible relationship between language and gender, which researchers working within this (sociolinguistic) tradition seek to provide answers to. These questions include:

i. Do men and women talk or use language differently?
ii. If indeed men and women use language in different ways, how can we account for such differences?
iii. If sex differences exist in language use, what can we infer about the respective positioning of men and women in society?
iv. Does language encodes and perpetuates patriarchy or sexism?
v. How can we use insight gained from researching therelationship from language and gender to endanger social change in the society?

One of the first academic attempts to answer some of the above questions was made by the Danish linguist, Otto Jesperson, who in 1922 authored a book, *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin*, in which he claims that men's linguistic behaviour was the norm and women's speech style was a deviation from that norm. He states that women used limited vocabulary in their speech and like using adverbs of intensity such as 'awfully pretty', 'terribly nice', etc. He also identifies women as speaking more quickly than men, often breaking off what they are saying mid-sentence as with 'Well, I never', 'Did you ever!', etc., a speech style, he views, as a form of deficiency in women's language (see a reprinted copy of Jespersen's chapter on women's language in Cameron 1998, for a detailed discussion). In spite of the fact that none of Jasperson's claims was based on empirical evidence, as they were, in the words of Talbot, 'pure conjecture' on his part (2010:35), his research has somewhat contributed to the development of the 'deficit' theory of gender and language (to be explained later).

While work on language and gender existed well before the Western women movement of the 1970s and 1980s, the 'second-wave' feminist movement in the United States and Europe is said to have led to the development of language and gender studies as a coherent field of study. In an attempt to go beyond folklinguistic ideas or assumptions about how men and women talk or use language (the assumption that men are more assertive than women in conversation, for example), early feminist researchers have focused on exploring the relationship between gender and language. Readers interested in folklinguistics should consult Goddard and Patterson (2000). It is worthy to note that much of early feminist researchers work on gender and language has focused on the description of differences in the way men and women talk or use language, as they sought to show how the differences both reflect and perpetuates women's subordination in society. Due to space limitation and the need to give reasonable treatment to the subject, I cannot discuss all the sociolinguistic oriented studies conducted on language and gender, here. I therefore limit my discussion to three classic works that have offered, in varying degrees, insight into the complexity of the relationship between gender and language, and which has also greatly influenced subsequent work on the subject. These are, as was stated earlier, Lakoff (1975), Spender (1980) and Tannen (1990), representing the so-called 'deficit', 'dominance' and 'difference' theories on gender and language respectively (to be explained later). For purposes of convenience and ease of exposition, a sub-section is devoted to each of the above work. I shall begin with Lakoff's (1975) groundbreaking work.

3.1 Robin Lakoff's (1975) *Language and Woman's Place*

Against the background of the 'second-wave' feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the publication of Robin Lakoff's seminal work *Language and Woman's Place* first as an article in 1973 and as a book in 1975 launches a new era in language and gender

studies, as it has provided a 'starting point' from which to explore the intricate relationship between gender and language. In this seminal work, Lakoff claims that 'women use language in a distinctive way, notable for its uncertainty, weakness and excessive politeness' (Talbot, 2010:36), an assumption which was both questioned and supported by various feminist scholars and researchers (see Bucholtz 2004 for an overview of studies that has built on Lakoff's work). Lakoff's work was mainly concerned with two things: (i) the linguistic behaviour of women and, (ii) how they are represented in language. I shall begin with the several distinctive lexical and syntactic features Lakoff identified with women's language. These include but not limited to the following aspects of language.

- *Hedge*: Women, according to Lakoff, do use phrases like 'kind of', 'sort of', 'you know', 'it seems like', which reduces the forcefulness of an utterance. She claims that women use of these 'filler' items known as hedges, 'arises out of a fear of seeming too masculine by being assertive and saying things directly' (2004:79). Assertiveness, Lakoff points out, is something that is considered in appropriate for a woman (in those days).

- *Super polite forms*: Women's language contains a lot of phrases that express politeness like 'Would you mind…?', 'if it is not too much to ask', 'I'd appreciate it if…', which may be seen as expressing weariness.

- *Expletives*: She claims that women tend to use 'weaker' expletives such as, 'Oh dear', as oppose to men's 'bull shit', which is considered too vulgar and impolite for a woman.

- *Affective adjective*: Lakoff observes that women tend to use adjectives that express feelings rather than referential meaning. She identifies words or what she refers to as 'empty' adjectives, e.g., *adorable*, *lovely*, *charming*, *divine*, etc., as distinct to women's language.

- *Tag questions*: This is another salient characteristic of women's language. Lakoff maintains that women use more tag questions than men. Tag questions like 'The war in Vietnam is terrible, isn't it?' and 'You are going to dinner, aren't you?' are capable of, as Lakoff argues, turning an assertive statement into an approval-seeking question, and consequently reduces the forcefulness of an utterance.

- *Colour terms*: Lakoff maintains that women use more words for particular forms of colour than men do. She suggests that words for colour such as *beige*, *aquamarine*, *ecru* and *lavender* are distinct to women's language.

- *Hypercorrect grammar and pronunciation*: She identifies women as having the tendency to seek to use standard dialect or variety of language than men. This, according her, was based on the cultural norm that 'women are not supposed to talk rough' (2004:80), which makes them to always seek to use the prestigious linguistic forms.

- *Emphatic stress* (speaking in italics): According to Lakoff, women's intonational emphasis in speech is equal to underlining words in writing, as in 'What a <u>beautiful </u>dress!', 'I want <u>something </u>to eat', etc. Women, she suggests, give unnecessary emphasis to certain words because they often fear 'that their words are apt to have no effect' (1975:56) unless, they give them such emphasis.

According to Lakoff, the socialization pattern that most women are exposed and subjected to socializes them into accepting a subordinate status in society, which also reflects the distinctive way they talk or use language. Based on her remembered impressions, she points out that from childhood, the woman is taught and often compelled to adopt a particular social behaviour, including language use. Therefore, women tend to talk or use language in ways they might think or experience as appropriate or socially acceptable for persons of their gender group, and hence, the assumption that women speak a distinct language.

On representation of women in language, Lakoff highlights some linguistic disparities in the use of certain symmetrical terms that have different or non-equivalent meanings for women and men, some of which are outlined below.

- Women regardless of their age, are often referred to as 'girls', suggesting immaturity on their part. This, as Lakoff points out, is not the case with men in most cultures.

- While the term 'master' has positive connotation referring to a man who has acquired certain skills or has a good grasp of a field, the word 'mistress' takes negative connotation, as it is used in sexual sense. The same is true for the categories 'bachelor' and 'spinster' (see Baker, 2006:104-115, for discourse prosody of these symmetrical categories).

- Certain occupational titles for women have no equivalent for men. For example, the term 'saleslady' has no corresponding pairs for men in that, a man doing the job of selling things cannot be referred to as 'sales gentleman', only as 'salesman'.

- Onlyw omen are often referred by their marital status, as if men never get married.

These and other examples of linguistic disparities in the representation of men and women in language have led Lakoff to declare that language both reflects and reproduces unequal gender power relations in society. As such, and as men were, at the time Lakoff conducted her research, seen as the dominant gender group in much of the Western world and beyond, their speech style was assumed to be the norm and women's speech style was considered as a deviation from that norm. Thus women, with their 'lady-like' speech style, their assumed distinct language, if it ever exist, was viewed as a deviant and deficient version of men's language. This is the main hypothesis of the so-called 'deficit theory' of language and gender, which was promoted by Lakoff's work.

Despite its huge contribution to our understanding of the complexity of the relationship between gender and language, Lakoff's work suffers a number of problems. The first problem identified with her work, is her assumption that women's language is a deficient form of the purported male norm, which implies that there is something wrong with women's speech style, which as Lakoff assumes, has contributed in putting women into a subordinate position. If women can work on their language, she suggests, they can tackle the issue of their subordination in society. This, in my opinion, sounds untenable because no matter what speech style a woman decides to adopt, she may still be ridiculed or look down on. It is also worthy to point that rather than challenging the gender stereotypes, which Lakoff's work was initially designed to do, it ended up, reinforcing 'many of the sexist, folklinguistic stereotypes that were evident in the work of Jesperson' (Speer, 2005:36), who in 1922, as I mentioned earlier, published a book in which he quotes pieces by men (see sub-section 1.2.1), Lakoff, it would seem just reflects and reproduces ideas about gender and language circulating in her society in the early and mid 20th century, without seeking to change the perspective to the other side. Thus Lakoff's account of event is not markedly different from that of Jesperson, as both rely on their own intuitive way of looking at things or, in this case the relationship between gender and language. This brings me into the methodological flaws in Lakoff's approach.

A second major problem with Lakoff's work focuses on her methodological approach. Lakoff's description of her purported women's language was based on her own introspection, rather than on any systematic quantitative or qualitative research methodology. As Sadiqi reports, Lakoff's work 'was based on the sort of evidence she, as a syntactician, had been trained to use, and, as such, was not based on 'sociolinguistic' empirical evidence' (2003:6) or, everyday language use of women. In many ways, her methodological approach was found to be problematic or even unscientific, as it was completely based on her own insight. Little wonder, Lakoff herself had to subsequently acknowledge that some of her assumptions are no longer academically viable (see Lakoff 2000:135). For example, O'Barr and Atkins (1980) have examined the features of the language women use in courtroom context and found that most of the features Lakoff identified in her work were more related to one's social status rather than gender. Similarly, Cameron et al (1989) found that regardless of gender, individuals who take up the role of conversational facilitator are more likely to use more tag questions than those who do not. Goddard and Patterson have also found that many of the words, and hedges such as 'well', 'sort of', 'kind of', which Lakoff claimed are redundant elements of talk, are indeed important aspects of speech, as they fulfill important communicative functions. They suggest that these linguistic resources help speakers to 'sound relaxed and informal' in everyday

interactions (2000:98). On the link Lakoff has established between gender and politeness, Mills (2003) challenges the notion that women are more polite than men. She reports several incidences of women acting just as impolite as some men in particular contexts or situations. She argued that politeness is something that is related to context rather than gender.

Despite these and other problems identified with Lakoff's work, it has continued, as Bucholtz and Hall note, 'to be accepted by diverse groups of speakers as a valid representation of their own discursive experiences' (1995:6), especially in Africa where some the features Lakoff identified with women's language can be found in the speech styles of some women. Some of her assumptions about the relationship between gender and language still resonate with many feminist researchers within linguistics and other disciplines in social sciences. This can be attested by the publication of the second edition of the work in 2004, which includes contributions by some key gender and language researchers and annotations of the original text (first edition of the work) by Lakoff herself. That Lakoff's book, *Language and Women's Place* has remained a much cited work in the domain of language and gender studies since its publication in the 1970s, speaks volumes of its initial and ongoing significance. Lakoff is, therefore, as Bucholtz declares, 'not a failed feminist thinker, as some of her critics have alleged' (2004:127), and her work is no doubt a landmark in language and gender studies.

3.2. Dale Spender's (1980) *Man Made Language*

The publication of Dale Spender's (1980) *Man Made Language* marks another milestone in language and gender studies. Conducted within the first strand of sociolinguistic research on gender and language, Spender's work has offered another influential perspective to understanding the complexity of the relationship between gender and language. She suggests that research on gender and language should focus on the social structure in society rather than on particular persons' speech style. According to Spender, 'when we begin to address ourselves to questions of this kind it will be possible to shift towards locating inadequacies and deficiencies within the social structure and not within individual human beings' (1980:51). Thus, rather than focusing on assumed features of women's language, Spender proposes paying more attention to sexism in language, with a view to examining how it evolves, works and how it can be corrected or changed. In other words, research in the domain of gender and language, according to her, needs to focus on the analysis of how 'patriarchal order' (1980:31) contributes to exclusion and 'silencing' of women in society, rather than on assumed features of women's language. In this classic work, Spender has articulated a theory of male control over language refers to, in much gender and language literature, as the 'dominance' framework.

Beginning with the premise that language is a powerful instrument in the construction of reality[1], Spender claims that in English language 'reality' is constructed based on some rules that perpetuates and reinforces male superiority. Her major claim is that 'the English language has been literary man made and that it is still primarily under male control' (1985:12). In this sense, men are assumed to have control over rules and uses of language, according to which reality is constructed from their own point of view. Talbot aptly explains this assumption in the following words:

> Men [are assumed to] have a monopoly on the production of meaning, and therefore on the production of our perception of reality. Women's meanings are not encoded in the language, so that 'reality' is defined by men. Language encodes male versions of events. It reflects male interests and words have a male bias (2010: 42-43).

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[1] Language, according to Spender, 'helps form the limits of our reality. It is our means of ordering, classifying and manipulating the world. It is through language that we become members of a human community, that the world becomes comprehensible and meaningful, that we bring into existence the world in which we live.' (1985: 3)

For Spender, the English language has been skewed in favour of the males, favouring men's way of talking, their own meanings and perceptions of reality. She suggests that sexism exists in the language because men, who have been occupying position of power (as grammarians/linguists, politicians, philosophers, public orators, etc.,) held the language under their control, using it to construct reality based on their own subjective point of view, creating meanings that reflect their experience and/or perception of reality. This, as Spender argues, enables men to impose their own world-view on women, and thereby perpetuating and reinforcing 'the myth of male superiority' (1980:1). Male's monopoly over language, Spender notes, has placed women in a disadvantage position, as it has silenced them since they have had to use meanings (in English language) that do not reflect their experience or perception of reality. Citing example of how the term 'motherhood' is defined by men (who have never experienced this state of being) as a 'feminine fulfillment' (1980:54), a definition that obliterates all references to childbirth fear and pain and childcare stress. Drawing on Jessie Bernard's (1975) work, Spender argues that this meaning validates men's perception of reality and invalidates women's experiences. Thus women who do not experience motherhood in this idealistic way are left, as she notes, feeling inadequate, confused and doubtful of the validity of their experiences. Denied the linguistic means of expressing their own experience and perception of reality, she further points out, women are left with no choice but to validate male reality or remain silent, which as Spender contends, reinforces 'their own muted position' (1980:87) and exclusion.

Another forceful example Spender provides, which shows how sexism is deeply rooted in English language is the generic use of the terms 'man/he.' She claims that often these words are used to denote both men and women, which as she argues, makes women invisible because most 'people think *male* when they use the term *man*' (1980:151, emphasis in the original). Spender might be right here because while we are made to believe that these terms refer to 'people' in generic sense, the meaning that readily comes to mind when one hears or comes across these terms in text is that of male adult human beings (and not female adult human beings). That, as Spender observes, 'it is not just that women do not see themselves encompassed in the symbol of *he/man*: men do not see them either' (1980:154, emphasis in the original) shows that these terms have a male bias.

A third and final example in Spender's work I want to consider here is on sexual language. Spender compares some of the terms used to refer to sexual behaviour or action of men and women in English language and found that the words: *virile*, *penetration* and *potent* for instance, tend to emphasize men's role in sexual act while rendering that of women 'invisible'. According to her, 'for women to engage in extensive sexual activity there is only repudiation: she is a *nymphomaniac*, a *baller*, a *bitch*' (1980:175, emphasis in the original). The point she is making here is that sexual language in English was systematically skewed in favour of men, as the examples above demonstrates.

Spender's work has been acknowledged for introducing an approach that explores how both the *rules* and *uses* of language get involved in the perpetuation of 'patriarchal order' (1980:3). In other words, she examines how gender is represented in language (the rules of language) and how men and women use language (the uses of language) − elements which were hitherto treated separately, highlighting how they both play a role in silencing women. An approach, which has illuminated the way for later work that treats both elements (the *rules* and *uses* of language), as part of the social construction of gender (see also sub-section 1.3.2)

Furthermore, Spender's assumption that in mixed sex interactions, men tend to dominate the conversation, frequently interrupt their female co-interlocutors and are more successful at having the conversational topics they bring up, has ignited a flurry of research on conversational behaviour of men and women. For example, West and Zimmerman (1983) have shown that men silence women in conversations through interruptions and overlaps. Similarly, Fishman (1983) reveals that male interlocutors exercise dominance over their female co-interlocutors by refusing to take up their conversational gambits.

However, despite the publicity Spender's work has enjoyed and the significant influence it has had on feminist politics, it suffers some shortcomings in its account of the relationship between gender and language. To begin with her treatment of language as a tool men use to impose their own meanings on women, which as Goddard and Patterson note, depicts a picture of 'bullying men and meek, oppressed women…and…of men sitting round conspiring how to do women out of their linguistic inheritance' (2000:100). Thus, Spender fails to recognize the fact that not all men are in a position to dominate or exercise power over women. Women, in certain contexts, can and do also exercise power over men. Her one-dimensional treatment of gender power is, in my view, a major shortcoming on the part of Spender, as the issue is far more complex than the simplistic, 'monolithic' accounts she provides. As Talbot notes, her account of the relationship between gender and language was not sophisticated enough because she fails to extend her analysis to cover questions such as, 'in what institutions, in what situations and in what genres men can and do dominate women, and how those institutions, situations and genres help them to do so' (1998:134).This leads me into the conceptual muddling in Spender's work.

Conceptually, I find Spender's monolithic view of language unpalatable because, it seems to undermine the dynamic and creative nature of language. As Talbot notes, 'if language were half as monolithic as she claims, she would not have been able to write the book in the first place, […] the very changes she documents would have been impossible' (2010:44). This idealistic view of language, in my opinion, is a major drawback with Spender's work.

Methodologically, it seems to me that when one attempt to investigate male-female private conversations, one would have to face a dilemma in choosing how to go about with data collection. One has to make a choice as to whether s/he explains the purpose of the research to the interlocutors as a way of seeking their consent, which is ethical but, which can affect the result of the work because the data can become extrinsically motivated. Or, just record people's conversations without their knowledge, which is unethical, but can enable one to obtain what tenHave's (1999) refers to as the 'correct data'. The correct data, as he describes it, refers to naturally occurring male-female private talk which is not stage managed, extrinsically motivated and devoid of the participants 'realizations' that their conversations are been recorded (tenHave, ibid). This dilemma seems to keep many researchers away from attempting to replicate Spender's research as much as Lakoff's work, for instance.

3.3 Deborah Tannen's (1990) *You Just Don't Understand!*

A third and final work I want to consider in my review of studies conducted within the first strand of research on gender and language is Deborah Tannen's (1990) *You Just Don't Understand! Men and Women in Conversation*. In this influential and thought-provoking work, Tannen claims that although men and women use the same words and expressions, they tend to interpret and react to them differently. Drawing largely on the work of Maltz and Borker (1982) who applied Gumperz's (1982) framework for studying problems in inter-ethnic interactions, Tannen argues that men and women grow up in different cultures which results in them developing different communicative styles. As she says, boys and girls 'grow up in different worlds of words' (Tannen, 1990:43). A man's world, she explains, tend to centre on independence, whereas a woman's world tends to centre on intimacy.

Tannen argues that although independence and intimacy are things that both men and women need, men seems to be more interested on the former and women on the latter, which as she points out, results in them using the same words and expressions but often interpreting and reacting to them in different ways. She uses the term 'genderlects' (1990:42) to describe these differences. According to Tannen, women use 'rapport-talk' in which 'people try to seek and give confirmation and support, and to reach consensus' (1990:25), whereas men use 'report-talk' in which an interlocutor is positioned 'in a hierarchical social order'(1990:24). She suggests that the purpose of language use in conversations for men is to seek information, whereas for women, is to develop intimacy.

A conversational act in mixed-sex talk, according to Tannen, can be interpreted in two ways or, what she refers to as a *message* and a *metamessage*. Using the act of helping as an example, she explains that the *message* is 'the obvious meaning of an act', whereas the *metamessage* refers to the 'information about the relations among the people involved, and their attitudes toward what they are saying or doing it to' (1990:32). A conversational act, she explains further, can send either a symmetrical or an asymmetrical metamessages. In this sense, the act of helping in conversations for instance, can send either a symmetrical metamessage of rapport building or an asymmetrical metamessage of a differing status between two or more interlocutors. To illustrate her idea, she cites the example of a helping message: 'This is good for you', which according to her also, sends the metamessage 'I [the speaker] am more competent than you' (1990:32), and in that sense the act is good for the speaker rather than the hearer (or, the co-interlocutor). Men, according to Tannen, tend to interpret metamessages asymmetrically. Women, on the other hand, tend to interpret them symmetrically.

Another conversational behaviour that Tannen investigates is interruptions in conversations. She suggests that men are more likely to interrupt in conversations than women. She also insinuates that a male interlocutor may want to dominate talk, even where he appears to know less about the topic of the conversation than his female conversational partner because, according to Tannen, men tend to see conversation as an avenue to establish hierarchy or, a differing status. Women, on the other hand, she notes, tend to like listening rather than seeking to interrupt because, as she points out, since from childhood women have been socialized to be more polite and accommodating than men.

Tannen concludes that if men and women could keep these differences in mind while interacting with members of the opposite sex and adjust their conversational behaviour accordingly, misunderstanding and tensions between them that often arise during conversations could be averted. As she says that identifying and understanding gender differences in mixed-sex talks will make men and women to 'take the sting out' (1990:279) of their differences, learn and benefit from one another's communication styles.

Tannen's work has been acknowledged for overcoming most of the major problems identified with early work on gender and language. Her work does not treat women's communicative style as a deficient form of men's style evident in Lakoff (1975). It does not also presents men as imposing their meanings on women, as Spender (1980) and other 'dominance' theorists, claim. Tannen's work has remained a best seller for four consecutive years and has been translated into more than 30 languages. Many readers who have read Tannen's work have thanked her for writing a book that has helped to save their relationships, as it has enabled them understand and adjust to their partners' or spouses' communicative styles. Moreover, the 'two-cultures' framework she has offered has been taken up with interest by many feminist researchers, who sought to identify and describe a range of differences in the way men and women use language (see Coates 1986, Holmes 1995, for example).

However, despite all these virtues, the (difference) theoretical model Tannen has promulgated in her book (*You just don't understand!*) has been widely disputed. As Freed notes, her touting of a point of view that 'perpetuates negative stereotypes of women, excuses men their interactive failings' and their dominance tendency (1992:144) is one major weakness of her work. Although she carefully avoids discussing patriarchy and/or women as a subordinate and oppressed group, she did however refers to a set of asymmetries that communicates something like women are taught the skills of rapport building while men are taught those of dominance and power control. Thus while Tannen did not explicitly treats men's conversational style as the norm, she seems to emphasize the importance of the need for women to adjust to men's desire for status differentiation and independence over the need for men to understand women's desire for connection and rapport building. Moreover, her assumption that men tend to be direct in their talk implies that women's talk in an indirect manner. Even though, Tannen does not associates indirectness in speech with powerlessness, in most cultures it is often treated as such.

I also have a problem with the premise of her book that boys and girls grow up in two separate cultures, which results in men and women developing two distinct communicative styles. While I agree that the different socialization patterns to which boys and girls may be exposed and subjected to, in some cultures could led to the emergence of some differences in the way they use language, speaking of these differences as something that is static, as Tannen did, does not sounds plausible to me. This is because this approach fails to take into consideration that as boys and girls grow, the communicative styles they learned during childhood may change or even diminish completely as they become adults. Risman notes that 'individuals not only change over their lifetimes, they also change from moment to moment' (1998:2). Thus the claim that if a person is socialized to be a boy, he will grow up to adopt particular communication style associated with men for instance, is untenable because often boys grow up to adopt a speech style associated with persons of the opposite gender. For example, in northern Nigeria a group of men called `yan daudu tend behave like women, even though at childhood they (like all other persons of their sex group) might have been taught to behave like men (and not like women). The view also fails to recognize that being a man or a woman, as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet argue, 'is not a stable state but an ongoing accomplishment, something that is actively done both by the individuals […] and by those who interact with [them]' (2003:17).

Furthermore, given the highly integrated lives of men and women in many cultures, ascribing a particular cultural status to interactional patterns that result from childhood socialization does not sounds valid to me. As it fails to recognize variation in the way individuals of same sex category are exposed to different patterns of socialization in different families, communities and cultures. It also seems to me that there are some aspects of gender behaviours that may be seen as universal and independent of gender socialization. For example, male are said to be more aggressive than women. This seems to suggest that some aspects of gender can better be seen as 'innate' rather than something socially learned by individuals. However, this, as I said earlier, is subject to further research.

Much as I agree with Tannen that miscommunication between men and women can results from their lack of familiarity and adjustment to one another's gender-specific communicative styles, I also think that other factors such lack of adequate knowledge on the topic of a conversation, lack of interest in the topic, fatigue and paralinguistic aspects such as gestures can also cause miscommunication. Similarly, much as I agree that there may be differences in the way men and women talk, there may also be similarities. A focus on differences evident in the work of Tannen obscures the similarities, which can also be as pervasive as the differences.

Finally, the anecdotal nature of a large portion of the examples Tannen provides is another hole I pick with her account. Most of the times, she tends to make generalizations on the basis of a single incidence or a scantly data. For instance, on the basis of the story of a Jewish woman married to an Irish-American man (both living in the United States), she claims that Jewish women tend to express themselves indirectly within the domestic sphere. She made this and other similar claims without providing well-established facts to support them. For details of unjustified claims in Tannen's work, see the review by Freed (1992).

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have provided an overview and critique of the three influential sociolinguistic oriented studies that are considered as representative of the first main theoretical approaches to language and gender studies in sociolinguistics. Through the reveiw provided in the paper, it was was shown that the relationship between language and gender is complex. Although some of the claims made in the works reviewed have been flawed using data mainly from the West, the paper submits that in view of the reality of gender condition in Africa some of these claims should be re-evaluated rather than totally discarded. This is important because in the larger

African society, boys and girls, men and women are still largely exposed and subjected to different socialization patterns, which tended to impact on their gendered behaviour, including language use.

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