
IGBO PROVERBS AND FEMALE DEGRADATION: ABOH MBAISE DIALECT EXAMPLES

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Abstract

This study is a representation of the relationship that exists between some Igbo proverbs and female degradation, (the example of Aboh Mbaise dialect). The study investigates how Igbo proverbs degrade females in Aboh Mbaise dialect while the objective of the study is to examine why Igbo proverbs are used to degrade females in Aboh Mbaise dialect. The study made use of the primary and secondary sources of data collection. The primary sources include introspection, oral interview, and observation method while the secondary sources include sourcing of data from relevant books, journals, internet materials and magazines. The study adopted qualitative research design, the choice of this design is because it gives room for in-depth questioning of the respondents based on their responses and analysis of data is based on themes from descriptions. Area or cluster sampling technique was adopted in this study because Aboh Mbaise is large. The study adopted social construction theory of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman (1966) as its theoretical framework because proverb is a social construct. The population for the study was the entire Aboh Mbaise society with the study sample of twenty (20) people from Aboh Mbaise local government area. The findings revealed that not all proverbs in Aboh Mbaise dialect are sexist. Through the sexist proverbs, females are portrayed as being weak, unreliable, materialistic, unimportant, no value without husband etc. The findings also revealed that, sexist proverbs are used to checkmate the behaviours of the females and inculcate good virtues. The females though not comfortable with the sexist proverbs see them as normal way of life because they believe that it is the tradition of the land. Again, it was also discovered that sexist proverbs can be portrayed through the following ways: gender inequality, continuation of lineage, marriage, male domination, social life and human behaviour. The findings also revealed that sexist proverbs are not often used in Aboh Mbaise, rather they are used during interaction especially when there are ugly situations that need corrections. This seminar work therefore recommends that sexist proverbs should be reviewed or restructured so that people will be comfortable with proverbs and appreciate the wisdom they represent.

Key words: Sexism, degradation, proverb and dialect.

1.1 Introduction

Language reflects the belief and practices of a community as well as the individual characteristics of the inhabitants of that community. People of different tribes and races use certain language codes to express their beliefs, feelings, ideas, norms, values etc. Proverb is one of those language codes. People, especially the elders, use proverbs to give advice and teach accepted norms to the younger ones. Proverbs play vital roles in the life of the Aboh Mbaise people. It is one of the ways of conveying sexism in language. Sexism in language according to Paul (2020) are “all verbal practices which include how people are tagged and referred to as well as the techniques and strategies people adopt in order to devalue or silence a gender or group during interaction, women are mostly affected”.

The Aboh Mbaise people use proverbs to communicate various messages during interactions such as: degrading messages, flattery messages, appreciative messages, admonishing messages etc. This seminar work dwells on proverbs that convey degrading message towards the female gender. Any proverb that conveys degrading message against a gender and upholds another is sexist. Sexist proverbs are those proverbs that degrade a gender. Green (2016) sees a sexist proverb as any proverb that negatively portrays a particular gender and upholds another gender, the female gender is primarily affected. This seminar work on “Igbo proverbs and female degradation: Aboh Mbaise dialect examples” will focus on females.

1.2 The Mbaise people

Mbaise is an amalgamation of indigenous autochthonic clans which are connected by inter-marriages and situated in the heartland of Igbo land. It is located within the present Imo State of Nigeria. Mbaise has three local government areas which are: Aboh Mbaise Local Government Area, Ezinihitte Mbaise Local Government Area and Ahiazu Mbaise Local Government Area. Aboh Mbaise dialect is adopted in this study because of the variation in Mbaise dialects, the choice of Aboh Mbaise as the area of study is because Igbo land is too large.

1.3 Statement of the problem

Many researchers have done works on proverbs like Cotler (1996) who compiled the proverbs and sayings of the Oromo people of Ethiopia, Stepan (2020) who analysed the Spanish sayings and proverbs from the perspective of the methodology of the teaching of the phrase units of Spanish, Green (2016) who examined the nature of proverbs, Nwachukwu-Agbada (2002) who examined the content, forms and context of Igbo proverbs, Uzor (2010) who investigated proverbs and language and Duru (2020) who examined the characteristics of Igbo proverbs. No works on Igbo proverbs and female degradation has been found on Aboh Mbaise dialect. Therefore, the present study looks at Igbo proverbs and female degradation: Aboh Mbaise dialect examples with the aim of filling the knowledge gap found to exist in the subject matter. This study is different from other studies because none has examined Igbo proverbs and female degradation drawing examples from Aboh Mbaise dialect.

1.4 Aim and Objective

The aim of this study is to investigate how Igbo proverbs degrade females in Aboh Mbaise dialect while the objective of the study is to examine why Igbo proverbs are used to degrade females in Aboh Mbaise dialect.

1.5 Review of Related Literature

Edemode (2006) examined sexism in public communication using Nigerian women in politics. His findings revealed that in order to enhance their profession, Journalists in Nigeria

should always portray gender sensitivity in their reports bearing in mind that language is the bedrock through which the society enhance and express their experiences. Francis (1997) investigated children construction of sexism in Britain among pupils in primary school. She discovered that large number of children claimed they have observed incidents of sexism in schools and majority of the girls have been victims of that. Based on that, she made the following suggestions; (1a) Sexism being an excess of gender category maintenance can be utilized as a form of power or control. (b) Girls may be prevented from assertive resistance due to their constructions of feminism as passive or facilitating.

Again, Amadi (2016) using social construction theory examined benevolent sexism in Achi in Enugu State. Teachers of three secondary schools were used for this study. His findings revealed that women in Achi portray gentility, submissiveness, uphold traditional value and need protection from the men folk while the men portray superiority and also protect their women. Carmen (2012) compared sexist expression in English and Spanish. His findings revealed that Spanish and English societies practice sexism through language medium and deconstructing the stereotype is not the only way of eliminating sexism rather sexism can be eliminated when predominant sexist attitudes towards women become socially unacceptable. Ariene and Conchita (2018) investigated content analysis of sexist language occurrence on written discourse of junior pre service teachers. Their findings revealed that the most occurred sexist language on the written discourse of the pre service teachers are generic pronoun 'he and she', generic word 'man' used as a noun, verb and occupational titles. Oforji (2019:66) using social construction theory examined sexist sentences in Abia state using university students. His findings revealed that sexist discrimination affects both male and female but it is more on the female. He further revealed that the reason the discrimination is more on the female is because the word 'man' which represent the masculine image of male overshadows everything.

Mucchi-fains (2005) in her work on language reforms and gender examined sexist language in France. She recommended the use of the following terms in order to substitute the generic masculine in languages;

- (2a) The use of epicenes i.e. nouns that have only one form for both sexes e.g. Person.
- (b) The use of plural nouns or plural pronouns.
- (c) Belonging should be specified or made salient.
- (d) The use of splinting (paired pronoun or noun like he/she, man/woman).
- (e) The use of feminine instead of masculine as generic or the two genders shall be alternate.

Mills (2008) in her research on language and sexism at Sheffield University discovered that female related words convey negative meanings, low status, diminutiveness etc, while male related words convey positive meanings and high status. She cites example with the following:

(3) Using a 'girl' or 'woman' to refer to a male is almost universally an insult, but using 'boy' or 'man' to refer to a woman is not necessarily derogatory. She therefore concluded that the words that associate with the female do not have the same values as the same words that associate with males. Lameiras, Rodrigues and Castro (2004) on their research on hostile and benevolent sexism in Spain, discovered that there is no age related differences in women and men aged between eighteen and forty years. Again, Tao (2007) in his research on sexism in language testing in China using National Matriculation English Test (NMET) reveals that China lags behind in sexism in language use both in theoretical study and in practice. Also, Chen, (2016) examines sexism in English Language, in the analysis of classification, his findings reveals that using words and phrases to classify things are usually seen in the media. He further states that, it can be the main factor of discrimination. He also reveals that in

English, words that represent men are always positive while words that represent women are more often negative. Example;

(4) The word “governor” means who hold a supreme power to the army or lands, while the word “governess” refers to people who engage in service profession.

Therefore, the difference in the two words which are ‘governor’ and ‘governess’ signifies the different social power between male and female.

Diaz-Aguado and Martinez-Arias (2004) examined sexist attitude in Spain. They discovered that sexist attitudes are associated with attitudes towards violence among adolescents. Ferragut, Blanca and Ortiz (2016) carried out a research on sexist attitudes and beliefs during adolescence in Spain using Spanish adolescents for three consecutive years. Their findings revealed that boys score higher than girls in hostile sexism and sexist belief. Again, Uzor (2010:98) in his study on sexist language in Owerri using social construction theory discovered that words used to describe women are discriminatory and offensive, while words used to describe men are honourable and noble. Examples; (5) Words like woman, one who lives with me, mother of children etc are used to describe women, while words like our father, my master, my big father etc. are used to describe men.

Also, Xu (2008) in his analysis on positive male’s and negative female’s words in English, revealed that woman means female servants, being despised. Also, he discovered the following;

(6a) Some derived words of woman are more ridiculous. Example; a weak man is referred to as womanish, a flirtatious man is referred to as womanizer while a vulgar man is described as the root from a woman. (b) Some words used for male are positive. Examples; strength, courageous, manly, virile, masculine, great, star, sir and wizard (skilful man or magician). (c) Most words used for female are negative, examples; madam means gossiping woman, flirting woman or procuress, starlet means female star and which is connected to female demons. In addition, Carmen (2015) in his research on sexist language in Spain using EFL literature revealed that males appear as non-gendered or generic objects while women are not seen that way. He further revealed that women are not defined as general representatives of humanity but as specifically feminine categories who suffer linguistic discrimination. Examples; (7a) He is a secretary entails he works for an organisation while she is a secretary entails she does typing and general office work for a person. (b) He is a professional worker entails he is a highly qualified worker while she is a professional worker entails she is a prostitute.

Also, Swin, Mallet and Stangor (2004) in their research on sexist language in New York revealed that those who have sexist views are much likely to detect forms of sexism in language when presented with sentences to edit, with likelihood of detection decreasing as belief in modern sexism increases. They further investigated belief in modern sexism using sexist language. Their result revealed that belief in modern sexism can be an indicator. More so, Maslathif (2012) in his investigation on sexism language in the contemporary Islamic literature perspective in Northern Sumatra revealed that the Islamic literature is still bound by the sexist language in the realisation of the literature. He further states that it cannot be denied that sexist language used in producing Islamic literature tends to favour one gender that exists. Also, Musa (2020) in his research on sexist expressions in Nyakyusa language of Tanzania using data collected from four Nyakyusa speaking people as key informants through mobile phone interview revealed that Nyakyusa shows elements of sexism through five forms of sexist expression which are social gender, referential gender, proverbs, idioms and lexical gender.

1.6 Methodology

The population of this study was the entire Aboh Mbaise LGA. The research design adopted in this study is qualitative research design. The choice of this design is because it gives room for in-depth questioning of the respondents based on their responses, again, data are analysed by themes from descriptions and reported in the respondent's language. Area or cluster sampling method was adopted, this is because Aboh Mbaise is large and highly populated. Also, it will consume both time and money to use the entire Aboh Mbaise society for this study. Sample size of twenty (20) people was randomly selected from three villages (Ibeku, Lagwa and Umuhu) in Aboh Mbaise Local Government Area. Methods of data collection for this seminar work were both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include in-depth interview, introspection and observation method while the secondary sources of data collection include sourcing of data from relevant books, interview materials, journals etc. The instruments used for the collection of data for this seminar work are oral interview, observation technique and document consultation. This study will adopt the tone marking convention by Williamson and Emenanjo which states that all high tones should not be marked, all low tones should be marked and all step tones should be marked. The reason why this study adopted this convention is to reduce the rate at which tones are scattered in a work because when all tones are used in a work, the work appears untidy and irritating.

1.7 Theoretical Framework

Social construction theory was propounded by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman in 1966. This seminar work adopts this theory as its framework. This theory believes in social construction of reality. This theory holds that "all meanings and other things we perceive as reality are socially created because social construct can be so rooted in a culture that they feel natural, rather they are an invention of the society and therefore do not accurately reflect reality" Berger and Luckmann (1991). This theory believes that a great deal of human life exists as it does due to the society and interpersonal influence. This theory deals with culture and society. The following are the cardinal principles emphasized in this theory; realities are constituted through language, human beings sustain knowledge through social processes, reflexivity in human being is emphasized in the theory. In social construction, the people in the community accept and sustain the community's understanding of the facts and values that hold in the society, these socially constructed ideas are engraved and rooted in the society, when these ideas are not checked or reviewed by the society, they become fixed and unchangeable. This study adopts this theory because proverbs are social constructs.

2.1 Data Analysis

In this seminar work, analysis focused only on sexist proverbs (proverbs that degrade females) in Aboh Mbaise dialect. Eighteen (18) proverbs were selected and grouped under the following themes; gender inequality, continuation of lineage, marriage, male domination, social life and human behaviour. The interpretations of the sexist proverbs were based on the context of use and the notion of Aboh Mbaise society. The sexist proverbs were first stated in Aboh Mbaise dialect, Igbo language and the English meaning.

2.2 Gender inequality

	Abọh Mbaise dialect	Standard Igbo language	English meaning
A	Nwaanyị sị ya la nwokò hà, ya nyulie maamiri elu anyịh lere.	Nwanyị sị ya na nwokè ha, ya nyulienwa amiri elu anyị lèrè.	A woman who claims equality with a man should urinate upwards let's see.
B	Nwaanyị ànahù akpa oke àlà.	Nwanyị ànaghị akpa oke àlà.	A woman does not negotiate a land boundary.
C	Ọnọdũh nwaanyị wụ n'usekwu	Ọnọdu nwanyị bụ n'usekwu.	A woman's place is in the kitchen.

In Abọh Mbaise, these sexist proverbs are used when a woman wants to claim equality with a man. These sexist proverbs are used to portray women as being below men. Women do not in any way contest equality with the men, reason being that women are seen as being fragile and weak.

2.3 Continuation of lineage

	Abọh Mbaise dialect	Standard Igbo language	English meaning
A	Agburu choro ishieshi wu naani nwaanyị ka a ga-imu.	Agburu choro ichiechi bu naani nwanị ka a ga-amu.	Any lineage that wants to go into extinction will give birth to only female.
B	Nwoko a muru ya la nwaanyị wu naani ya ka a muru.	Nwoko a muru ya na nwanị bu naani ya ka a muru.	Any man who has females as siblings has nobody.
C	Nwaanyị anahũ ebishi obiri amah nna ya.	Nwanyị anaghị ebichi obiri ama nna ya.	A woman does not occupy her father's compound.

In Abọh Mbaise, these sexist proverbs are used when a woman gives birth to only females. These sexist proverbs are used to portray women as not being important and cannot continue their father's lineage. Women do not inherit any of their father's properties, they do not attend family meetings. They are seen as members of another family because they will marry and leave their father's compound. Based on that, no hope is put on them when it comes to continuation of their father's lineage.

2.4 Marriage

	Abọh Mbaise dialect	Standard Igbo language	English meaning
A	Mmāh nwaanyị wu di.	Mmā nwanị bu di.	The beauty of a woman is derived from her husband.
B	Nwaanyị zachaa onyè muru, yaazawa onyè luwa.	Nwanyị zachaa onyè muru, yaazawa onyè luwa.	When a woman stops answering whose daughter is this, she will start answering whose wife is this.
C	Di wu ugwu nwaanyị.	Di bu ugwu nwanị.	Husband is the prestige of a woman.

In Abọh Mbaise, these sexist proverbs are used when a lady rejects many suitors or refuses to marry. There, these sexist proverbs are used to portray women as being nothing without husband. A woman is accorded respect because of her husband. It is assumed that any woman who refuses to marry, amounts to nothing. Also, the unmarried person's family and the society will not be happy with such a person.

2.5 Male domination

	Abọh Mbaise dialect	Standard Igbo language	English meaning
A	Nwaanyị lelịa di ya, otulè akpọọ ya nkuh.	Nwanyị lelịa di ya, ike akpọọ ya nkụ.	When a woman disrespects her husband, she suffers.
B	Nwaanyị (ogori) lụọ di abọọ, yaa mara nke kammah.	Nwanyị (ogori) lụọ di abọọ, ya a mara nke kamma.	When a woman marries two husbands (remarries), she will know the one that is better.
C	Nwaanyị ajọ di ka nwaanyị ishimkpe mmāh.	Nwanyịajọ di ka nwaanyị isimkpe mma	A woman who has a bad husband is better than a widow.

In Abọh Mbaise, these sexist proverbs are used when a woman complains of maltreatment from her husband. These sexist proverbs are used to portray women as being under men and therefore should be submissive to their husbands. A woman is expected to endure whatever she encounters in marriage. She is expected to remain in the marriage no matter how bad she is being treated. When she leaves the marriage because of maltreatment, the society sees her as being evil. She is also expected to respect and be submissive to her husband not minding the suffering and maltreatment she encounters in her marriage.

2.6 Social life

	Abọh Mbaise dialect	Standard Igbo language	English meaning
A	Mmāh nwaanịi wụ ngwāh.	Mma nwaanyị bụ ngwa.	A woman's beauty is her ornamental habiliment.
B	Ngwah nwaanyị ji achọ Mmāh ka ndūh ya mkpa.	Ngwa nwaanyị ji achọ mma ka ndụ ya mkpa.	A woman prefers her ornamental habiliment more than her life.
C	Nwaanyị teeh uriọnu, teeh urianya, ihe ụwà ezuolere yè.	Nwanyị tee uriọnu, tee urianya, ihe ụwà ezuole yà.	When a woman applies lip stick and eye shadow, she becomes satisfied with life.

In Abọh Mbaise, these sexist proverbs are used when a woman is materialistic and self-centred. These sexist proverbs are used to portray women as being beauty conscious and materialistic. Women are expected to focus on child-bearing, child-rearing, home management and pay little or no attention to material things and beauty.

2.7 Human life

	Abòh Mbaise dialect	Standard Igbo language	English meaning
A	Mgbe ọdòh nwaanyị wụ ụghà.	Mgbe ọzò nwaanyị bụ asị.	When a woman says next time, she lies.
B	Onyè jì nwaanyị hiwe ishi, gba ishi ọtò.	Onye jì nwaanyị hinye isi, gba isi ọtò.	One who uses a woman as a pillow, has no pillow under his head
C	A na-emere nwaanyị, ya la-emere onyedị ya mmāh.	A na-emere nwaanyị, ya na-emere onyedị ya mma	As you are doing something for a woman, she will be doing for another that she likes.

In Abòh Mbaise, these sexist proverbs are used when a woman disappoints a man. These sexist proverbs are used to portray women as unfaithful, unreliable and liars. There, women are expected to be truthful at all times and also faithful to their husbands.

2.8 The findings

The results showed that proverb is one of the ways of conveying sexism in language Abòh Mbaise dialect. Most of Abòh Mbaise proverbs are sexist because they degrade the females. Through these sexist proverbs, the females are portrayed as being fragile, weak, unreliable, unfaithful, materialistic, valueless without a husband etc. The study also revealed that the idea of the sexist proverbs was not to harm women, rather it was to inculcate good virtues, guard against bad behaviour and to maintain male patriarchy. The findings also revealed that although women are not comfortable with the sexist proverbs, they see it as tradition. Again, sexist proverbs are not used always, rather they are used when there are ugly situations that need corrections. The study also revealed that in Abòh Mbaise, sexist proverb can be portrayed through gender inequality, continuation of lineage, marriage, social life, human behaviour and male domination.

3.1 Conclusion / Summary

This study on Igbo proverbs and female degradation: Abòh Mbaise dialect examples has three sections, the first section dwells on introduction, the second section dwells on the body of the work while the last section dwells on the conclusion and summary. Proverb is one of the language codes people from different tribes and races use in communication. Proverbs can be used to communicate different messages depending on the context of use. Proverbs that communicate degrading messages against a gender and uphold another gender are sexist proverbs. Even though not all Abòh Mbaise proverbs are sexist, sexist proverbs exist in Abòh Mbaise. In Abòh Mbaise, sexist proverbs can be portrayed through the following ways; gender inequality, continuation of lineage, marriage, male domination, social life and human behaviour. In Abòh Mbaise, these sexist proverbs are not always in use, they are used in extreme cases.

3.2 Recommendation

Although these sexist proverbs are used in extreme cases, it will be good if they are reviewed or restructured so that everyone will be comfortable with proverb and appreciate the wisdom it represents.

3.3 Contribution to knowledge

Through this study, the students of languages and linguistics will have reference sources for future research. Again, this study will contribute to the growth of Igbo language in particular and the world at large.

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