

Linguistic Violence and the Status of Women in Igbo Society: The Case of Ehugbo

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Abstract

The goal of this paper is to examine the use of language and the status of women in Ehugbo-Igbo. Ehugbo is an urban settlement in the present day Ebonyi State, South East Nigeria. Until recently, feminist linguistics has discovered that the subtle and abusive forms of language use in Ehugbo are often derogatory to the women, a situation traceable to the cultural dictates of a male dominated culture. There is a believe that some aspects of knowledge may erode time held values and even encourage marginalization or outright oppression. However, it is the recommendation of this paper that any form of language use should be understood based on the context of usage rather than taken as derogatory remark aimed at women. Using data carefully gathered, the paper adopts a purposive method of data analysis to examine some form of language use and the status of women in Ehugbo.

Keywords: Linguistics, violence, Derogatory, Igbo, society, Ehugbo,

Introduction

In the business world, making a good impression and projecting yourself as mature, intelligent, confident and professional is critical to long – term success, inappropriate language, whether spoken or written, can negatively affect your credibility, and put off or even offend those you work with. Both in speech and writing therefore effort should be made to use appropriate language.

Language is power and its validity equal, therefore its appropriate use is paramount in every society because with it one can make or mal, build or destroy as well as persuade, abuse, hurt or even cause the death of another. Man from time immemorial is known to intimidate, dominate, exploit, coerce and terrorize his fellow – man by means of language or the threat of violence in the pursuit of power, material gain, or in order to impose a particular doctrine, ideology or principles. Researches have revealed that women are always at the receiving end; hence making them the proverbial grass that suffer when two elephants fight. This act of using language to hurt, wound or even cause the death of another is termed linguistic violence by linguists.

Therefore, linguistic violence is the infliction of abuse, hate speech or name calling by anyone to another, this is primarily interpreted as perpetrated by men against women. In that, it encompasses many forms, ranging from physical and sexual enactments to social, economic, emotional and psychological manifestation. This is why the United Nations in (1993) sees it as any act “...that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women”.

The nature of violence acts in homes, work places, have more influence on women and this often leads to physical injuries, sexual abuse, psychological humiliation, deprivation of their rights and negligence towards responsibility. Violence against women is a technical term used to holistically refer to violent acts that are primarily or exclusively committed against women. It therefore, specify the ways women suffer as victims of culture or societal mistreat. Similar to hate crime, this type of violence targets a specific group with victim’s gender as primary motive.

Linguistic violence against women, the subject of this paper is an instance of the power – play obtainable in every society, this present study will use feminist linguistic to establish the instances of linguistic violence on the premise that men (male) and women (female) use language differently in communicating ideas. From socio-linguistics perspective, the study focuses on the manifestation of violence in language use against Ehugbo women by Ehugbo men as traceable in their use of proverbs, idioms, songs and other

linguistics behaviours. This will serve as the crux of the study and to gain positive result, the study intends to relate feminist perspective to linguistic violence, identifying specific instances of linguistic violence in the Ehugbo society, and recommend solutions to the instances of violence so identified.

Conceptual clarification and definition of terms

The term violence according to Chukwuma (2013) is a power relationship which in essence, is more about men and boys feeling that they have power and control over women and young girls, by physically and sexually assaulting them into submission. Willheim (2009) divided violence into four broad categories according to the characteristics of those committing the violence act, as listed below;

- **Self directed violence:** Is a type of violence a person inflicts upon himself or herself.
- **Collective violence:** is a violence committed by larger groups of individuals or by states
- **Interpersonal violence:** Is a family and intimate partner's violence; that is, violence that occur between family members and intimate partners.
- **Community violence:** which relates to inter personal violence is between individuals who are unrelated, and who may or may not know each other. Such violence takes place outside the home. The former category include forms of violence such as child abuse, abuse of the elderly, intimate partner violence, the later includes youth violence, random acts of violence, rape or sexual assault by strangers, and violence in institutional settings such as schools, work places, prisons, and nursing homes. When interpersonal violence occurs in families, its psychological effects can affect parents, children, and their relationship in the family.

However, the nature of violent acts has more influence on women that often lead to physical injuries, sexually abused, psychological humiliation, deprivation of their rights and negligence towards responsibility. Hence, violence against women is a technical term used to collectively refer to violent act that are primarily or exclusively committed against women. It therefore specifies the way women suffer as victims of cultural or societal mistreat. Similar to hate crime, this type of violence targets a specific group with victim's gender as primary motive.

United Nations General Assembly (1993) defines violence against women as any act of gender based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual, mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. Also, the 1993 declaration on the elimination of violence against women notes that this violence could be perpetrated by assailants of either gender, family members and even the state itself.

Linguistic violence is therefore a concept used to capture the psychological, social use of any instance of language to abuse, offend to hurt someone or group of people. Arendt (1970:35) says that violence is nothing more than the most flagrant manifestation of power. Linguistics violence is a form of physical violence, in which concrete scientific findings have provided evidence on how it impacts negatively on its targets or victims, in a very palpable and physical way. Agu (2009) posits that our culture and the society in general seem to have made women subordinate and slaves of men, created to serve them and gratify their desires thereby exposing women to emotional harm.

The focus on linguistic violence is not only linguistic differences between men and women but also on the experience women have in times of violence as members of the society. Violence could be related in form of physical force or power, threat against oneself, another person or a group of persons that can result in injury, death, psychological harm, mal –development or deprivation of one's right especially women. A common assumption is that violent issues are the issues affecting mostly women. It focuses mainly on the relationship between men and women to the social, political and economic structure of the society.

The foregoing shows that this phenomenon, linguistics violence is characterized in the ways men use hate words, bullying, fighting words, name calling, threats, slanderous, statements, cruel metaphors and swear words against women.

Hate crimes provides one illustration in development on the legal and sociological fronts regarding the impacts made on its victims, hate crimes, even merely verbal ones, do physically hurt their victims.

Studies have shown that victims of hate words routinely become depressed and physically lethargic. Victims of such are often psychologically and physically ill, the verbal or linguistic manifestation of hatred, i.e, linguistic violence, result in a real hurt.

Proverbs and idioms

Proverbs according to Wikipedia (from Latin: Proverbium) is a simple and concrete saying, popularly known and repeated which expresses a truth based on common sense or the practical experience of humanity. Achebe (1958) posits that proverb is the palm oil with which words are eaten. However, Nwode and Azubuike (2016) see proverbs beyond the oil with which words are eaten but include the pepper, salt, onions and every other spices that make the concoction palatable and help the yam to go down well. Lewis (2013) explains that “African proverbs are the foundation of social and cultural wisdom and therefore serve as the basis for formulation of concepts that govern the social relations. For Cayne (1984) proverb is a brief familiar maxim of folk wisdom, usually compressed in form, often involving a bold image and frequently a jingle that catches the memory.

However, Fashina (2011) claims that more advanced exposure to the science and semantic philosophy of proverbs now reveals that proverbs are strategies of discourse complication, which takes discourse to the level of the sublime. But Etta and Mogu (2012) opine that African proverbs are necessarily essential in understanding and transmitting African epistemology because knowledge has been acknowledged to be indispensable for human existence, as well as the core of epistemology. Egobiambu (2013) on his part says that every tribe in the African continent has a repertoire of proverbs employed in various facets of life. According to him, proverbs are a mirror in which a community can look at itself and reveal itself to others, it highlights the values, the aspirations, the behaviours of people, and the angle from which they see and appreciate their reality and response.

Mieder (1993:24) observes that a proverb is a short generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorable form and which is handed from generation to generation. Nnadi et al (2006:90) in their conceptualization of proverbs, see it as embodiment of wisdom, and beauty on the aggregate, proverb expresses wit, philosophy, vision and wisdom that strike with its beauty which result from its sense, its shortness and the literary devices with which it is embellished. Ene (2010) opines that Igbo idiomatic expression either proverbs or parables are devised to enliven and to enchant. The listeners are made to think deeply and sometimes show appreciation.

Methodology

This study examines linguistic violence against Ehugbo women, in the eight (8) communities that make up Ehugbo, i.e. Ozizza, Ugwuegu, Ohaisu, Nkpogoro, Itim, Unwana, Akpoha and Amasiri, with a total population of 156,611 according to the 2006 Nigeria National population census. The above figures put together cannot be accessed by the researcher given the vast nature, hence the reliance on sampling method, used to arrive at the representative population. The method used was the purposive method, the study broke down the population into subgroups and in each of the eight communities, five persons were selected, hence, a total of forty (40) respondents were used for the study. The researcher made use of oral interviews to elicit information from the respondents, using skillful interpersonal communication technique through verbal interaction to avoid scaring the respondents away. The data gathered were examined and analyzed descriptively.

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i. Proverbs

The language of proverb surpasses the day to day and domestic use of language. It is imbued with force, dexterity, ambiguity. etc. Hence, its understanding depends on a premise which must be understood by the discussants. Notwithstanding the shared common parlance between the interlocutors, and the content can easily be misinterpreted, though the Igbo people in general and the Ehugbo people in

particular will ridicule a non-initiate by saying *onye a tūrū ilu kowaaria ya, ugwọ a kwūrū n'isi nnewo la ria n'iyi* (he who proverb is explained to have rendered useless his/her mother's bride price). One factor to this misunderstanding and misinterpretation is because Ehugbo proverbs are mostly metaphorical and refers to life outside the human realm. In Ehugbo feminine proverbs, the symbols used are mostly woman/female feature. Imagery is a visual representation of something, a physical likeness or representation of a person/animal, or thing photographed, painted, sculptured or otherwise made visible. One fact about proverbs and idioms is that they utilize the instrument of language to capture the image. In the context of this study, images stand as the ways the world, the Ehugbo person (man/woman) in Igbo society present women via the use of words. No one can see the mind's construction on the face. The order in which these words are structured and presented appeal differently to individuals. This forms the basis to the controversy surrounding the interpretation of the woman/feminine symbols/images in the sexist Ehugbo proverbs.

This situation is worrisome. Meanwhile, many critics have analyzed the symbols in the proverbs as derogatory on women. Feminist movement concerned with the struggle to end the sexist oppression while promoting the image of women by encouraging the propagation of positive female consciousness and awareness. However, based on the acceptance of Igbo proverbs (the sexist proverbs inclusive) as metaphorical, the divergent views on women by these derogatory proverbs as foolish, weak, unreliable, wicked, dangerous, and generally inferior to men have necessitated the present study to ascertain if they are worthy of the controversies:

i. **Women as examples to their children**

(a). Nne ewu n' ataghari onu, n'umụ a ana elie enya

IP: As the mother goat chew curd, the children are watching her.

AP: Your children learn from what you are doing.

ii. **Women as weakline**

(a). Nkita nwanyi zuru anagha agbo uja

IP: The dog trained by women, does not bark

AP: Anything done by a woman can never be the best.

iii. **Women as pretenders.**

(a). Nne omogo hu onye oka ike n'osi panata a nwa, ma o hu onye n'egbu e ili, n'osi o bu nne omogo.

IP: If a nursing mother sees a person that she defeats, she says that the child should be taken away from her, but when she sees the person that defeats her, she says it is because of the child that she is holding.

AP: When a person comes in contact with a simple task, he or she claims to be courageous, but when he/she faces difficult ones he/she gives excuses.

(b). Nwanyi wulue nri e n'osi o bu a ka ma

IP: If a woman makes mistake in cooking, she says it is the best.

AP: People cover up their mistakes by praising it.

iv. **Women as unreliable**

(a). Ana emeri nwanyi, nwanyi ana-emeri onye di a mma

IP: As you are doing for a woman, she is busy doing for the person she loves.

AP: One can only value gestures shown to him/her by a beloved one.

v. **Woman as untruthful**

(a). o nwanyi yania mari nna nwa a

IP: only the woman knows the father of her child.

AP: Only you know the truth.

vi. **Woman as incapacitated in power/strength**

(a) Oke osisi darue ali, na nwanyi aria ya elu.

IP: If a mighty tree falls, women will climb it.**AP:** If a respected person misbehaves, he or she is dishonored.

(b) Ibe eka ruru nwanyi n'otukwasi a di e

IP: The place where the hand of the woman reaches, she will place it on the husband.**AP:** Act within your ability.

The proverbs are interpreted on two semiotic planes: the interpretive plane (**IP**) which correlates with the literal glossing of the proverbs and the allusive plane (**AP**) which relates to the cultural, philosophical and societal meaning. The two planes interact in proverbial communication in order to drive home the intended message. One of the observations from the symbols used in the proverbs is that there is no one-on-one relationship between them and the actual message passed. On the interpretive plane, all the proverbs have women as the agent. The symbols that the agents interact with share no selectional restriction with the woman likewise. For example, in the proverb "*Nne ewu n'ataghari onu, n'umu a ana eli e enya*" and *Nkita nwanyi zuru*, the symbols, *agba* (cord), *nkita* (dog) cannot be concatenated with female (woman), activity. In like manner, the action (verb) *ta* (chew), *zuru* (trained) are not female (woman) specifiers which makes the result non-restrictive on the agent. On the allusive plane, the agents, patients and the verbs all bear different readings, depending on the environment. In the later, *nkita* stands for a person as the following illustrations; a student who graduated from a missionary secondary school where she was taught not to talk loud, but to walk gently, associate lightly, and eat to time, came to a village or a community where the reverse is the case, she struggles to maintain and practice the old life will be strange in behavior to the people. A question may arise; why is this fellow behaving this way? He/she passed out from Bishop Mcgethry catholic secondary school. The response will be no wonder... *nkita nwanyi zuru anaghi agbo uja*, meaning "students from that school are always gentle". Here *nwanyi* "woman" is the school while "dog" is the "student".

Furthermore, for proverbs captured as the cultural wisdom of a society intended to effect and impart on the persons within a given cultural context, the allusive plane succulently performs the function as inherent in a particular proverb. In this way, the agent in all the proverbs *nwanyi* (woman) of various forms suffices for: male, female, phenomena, animals, trees, living or non-living things. The effects of the interaction between the agent and the verb are what anyone (male, female) can experience under the same conditions.

Songs

A song is a composition made up of lyrics and music, with the intent of lyrics being sang, for the purpose of producing a proportional feeling or emotions in relation to a particular matter. In Ehugbo culture, whereas they are songs that enchant people, there are equally those that can spark off linguistic violence and some even create sensual picture of the female nudity. Lending credence to the above, Emeka-Nwobia (2007:49) says that "the vulgarity of the male folk is visible in the songs rendered in Afikpo (Ehugbo). The men freely talk about any part of their body and even the female genital organs. The women will rather call the male organs "*ihie*" 'his thing'. She asserts that men can always easily be heard make jest of the women's private parts in the following derogatory expressions;

- | | | |
|-----|---|---|
| i. | Gbanye m mini ikpu | pour some vagina water for me |
| ii | Onye ewekwe iwe na ejem nke egwu,
egwu onye ohi ikpu | Do not be annoyed that am going to Egwu's
house, egwu is a thief who specializes in
stealing women's vagina |
| iii | Utu ogologo, ikpu owiriwo | Long penis and deep vagina |

Women are not allowed to express themselves using some words or expressions used by masquerades and members of the '*ogo*' cult group. They are only given some linguistic impunity to talk about men's genital organs at certain seasons of the year during a particular cultural festival. However, this cultural practices were women are given linguistic impunity to talk about male genital organs at

certain seasons of the year is only limited to a fraction of Itim community in Ehugbo i.e. Mgbom and Amuro. The Ehugbo culture is a male dominated culture in that when the adult men compose derogatory songs to taunt, intimidate and oppress women, the young male who are non-initiates into the “ogo” cult does same in their own cult (ohia umu ena)

Conclusion and recommendation

In Ehugbo culture and society, linguistic violence on women is perpetrated both overtly and covertly. In the overt perspective, this violence is open to view and not concealed. But, in the covert the violence is concealed. Whereas the formal causes physical harm to the victim, the later causes emotional or psychological harm to the victim. This covert form of violent is often found in some cultural practices which being dominated by the men is seen as an act of violence which causes harm to the victim (the women). In the Ehugbo society, women played and still play significant role in the religious activities of their communities and villages. It is very certain in Ehugbo society that women participate in the religious activities of their society and make their own contributions to the spiritual welfare of their families and society at large. The women in traditional religion and Christianity have diverse ways through which they play active roles. In Ehugbo, women had their own freedom of worship and association just like their male counterparts, they had some female goddesses and priestess among them, they also had their shrines located in strategic places where they commune with their ancestors and offer libations to them.

However, the advent of Christianity lured women to abandon the traditional religion and the men took charge, thereby enacting laws that favour them which the women now consider as barbaric but have no powers to amend them. This is to say that linguistic violence did not start just like that. The Ehugbo society had equal regards for all, before the women left to embrace their new religion. Ironically, even the new religion (Christianity) is not women friendly, as they are often seen as weaker vessels and are meant to be under the men whatsoever, this is evident in the fact that, whereas the traditional religion permitted the existence of priestesses and goddesses the new religion abhors it. There are hardly female general overseers in our various churches, women hardly mount the pulpit in our various churches. In fact, the society is now a male dominated affair. Recently the Ehugbo women have been staging revolts upon revolts in order to revoke this trend but all their effort had been meet with stiff resistance from the men.

From the forgoing, there is need that the Ehugbo people and the Igbo society, promote massive education of the female gender through girl-child education and other gender based educational policies to limit the use of abusive words against women. Women in Ehugbo should never be discouraged to report any form of verbal or physical abuse to the appropriate law-enforcement quarters. Ehugbo men in particular and Igbo men in general should see language as a means of communication and not an avenue of maltreating women verbally. Ehugbo men should also avoid the use of proverbs that contain feminine imagery but should rather employ other more socially appropriate ones, especially in the presence of the women folk. In all, it is the recommendation of this study that proverbs, idioms and songs should be understood based on their context of application rather than the lexical elements in the proverbs or idioms.

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