ANDROCENTRIC COMMUNICATION IN POSTGRADUATE DISSERTATIONS IN A NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY

By

Alexander Essien Timothy
Arts Education Department, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria
alexander.timothy@unical.edu.ng

Abstract

Gender bias in the classroom has become an issue of global concern. This phenomenon is evident in textbooks, pedagogy, and the hidden curriculum. Since persons of all genders can equally contribute to national development, any factor that hinders persons of a particular gender from realising their full potentials should be examined and redressed. One of the areas where gender kurtosis is evident is in communication. This study, therefore, investigated the prevalence of gender skewness in academic communication. Data came from softcopies of postgraduate dissertations randomly selected from a large second-generation federal university in Southern Nigeria. Four null hypotheses were stated and tested, using the independent t-test. The analyses revealed clear evidence of androcentric or male-dominant communication in postgraduate dissertations. The result showed a significant difference between male and female dissertations in androcentric communication. In addition, masters' and doctorate degrees students also differed significantly in their androcentric communication.

Keywords: academic writing, androcentric communication, English language, gender, male-dominant.

Introduction

Androcentric communication refers to communication that is male-dominated or male-biased. The United Nations human rights declaration to which Nigeria is a signatory guarantees that no person shall be discriminated against based on gender. Despite such a laudable declaration that is further entrenched in the Nigerian constitution of 1999, in practice, sadly, it is flouted whether deliberately or inadvertently. The female person suffers discriminations that have manifold manifestations (Stroi 2019, Okpoku & William, 2019, Eyang & Edung, 2017, Eyang, 2016). The gender discrimination that is prevalent in the society percolates the school with adverse consequences (Battaglia, 2020; Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), 2006). Also, Stroi (2019) observe that gender-biased language was evident in job advertisements which could account for the lower percentage of women in the workplace. Also, gender bias in the classroom has become an issue of global concern. This phenomenon is evident in textbooks, pedagogy, and the hidden curriculum (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2019' Andrus et al, 2018).

Since persons of both genders can equally contribute to national development, any factor that hinders persons of a particular gender from realising their full potentials should be examined and redressed. One of the areas where gender kurtosis is evident is in communication. Nigeria has been described as a patriarchal society with a preference for the boy child in birth and property inheritance (Adetunji, 2010). One index of a patriarchal society is androcentric communication.

Hegarty and Buechel (2006) define androcentrism "as the implicit conflation of maleness with humanity and the consequent attribution of gender differences to females, often to women's disadvantage."(p.377). It is the tendency to place the masculine gender in a dominant position whether in thoughts, actions or expressions. Thus, androcentric communication will be that type of communication that is male-dominant in content and referents.

Hegarty and Buechel (2006) investigated androcentrism in 40 years of publications in APA journals. They examined 388 articles to see the use of the masculine third-person pronoun "he" in the articles. Also, they examined graphs as well as tables in the articles to see the differential and deferential placement of males before females. The researchers further counted the frequency of references to attributes of females and males. They found that only 7.7 percent, that is 30 articles that reported gender differences generically used the masculine pronoun. However, male data were positioned first before female data in graphs and tables.

Another study compared the incidence of generic pronouns in different corpora and variations of English. Adami (2009) investigated how generic pronouns are deployed in academic literature. The author examined "(a) the so-called 'Brown Family of the ICAME collection, (b) six components of the International Corpus of English, (c) the British National Corpus and (d) the current extent of the American National Corpus." For instance, "…the data retrieved from Verbatim (linguistics) confirm a clear preference for generic he (425 occ., compared to 10 and 12 of s/he and singular they respectively)." (p. 293). The study concluded that "generic *he* is still by far the preferred pronoun for singular generic reference…." (p.229). In other words, androcentrism is still much evident in academic writing.

In a study, Fast, Vachovskt and Bernstein (2016) examined the phenomenon of gender bias in an online fiction-writing platform, Wattpad. They sifted through 1.8 billion words to find out the description of male and female characters. They found that androcentrism was dominant even in writings authored by females.

According to the Commission for the Status of Women (2016), gender bias is also evident in letters of reference as writers use different expressions while referring to either sex. For instance, the Commission notes that in writing about women, writers are likely to use words like "hard work" for women rather than "accomplished." The Commission adds that even women are guilty of such stereotypes.

Given the seriousness of androcentric communication, Johnson (2016) has recommended the elimination of the generic use of man in writing. According to Hyland and Bondi (2006), "...we consider academic discourse as, firstly, a type of discourse produced to encourage cooperative actions and attitudes"(p.221). Therefore, academic discourse, especially in tertiary institutions should help build positive gender attitudes, rather than perpetuate stereotypes and sexist language. Orgeira-Crespo et al (2021) believe that gender bias in academic literature is not deliberate but unconscious. They analysed a corpus of more than 12,000 million words obtained from over 100, 000 doctoral theses from Spanish universities for gender bias in academic texts. They found that gender bias in texts was mainly a function of age (the older the author the more non-inclusive the language) and sex (women used more inclusive language than in men), and also that this awareness grows as the candidate is younger

Therefore, gender bias in communication, specifically androcentric or male-dominant language is pervasive in the Nigerian society (Eyang & Edung, 2017, Eyang, 2016). A study of four widely-read English M.Edium Nigerian dailies revealed a preponderance of male-dominant language and generic use of "man" in all the selected newspapers. Surprising this was also true for articles authored by female journalists (Olarewaju & Babalola, 2016).

A similar male-dominant communication was found in an analysis of the 2015 presidential debate in Nigeria (Adejare, 2017). The study found that the ratio of masculine to feminine pronouns to be 22:1. Even the 1999 Nigerian constitution is dominated by male-referent pronouns (Ezeifeka & Osakwe, 2013). The phenomenon of male-dominant communication has been traced to the English language itself, which is the official language in Nigeria. According to Odekunbi (2012, p. 1), "English Language is sexist i.e. it makes a gender, particularly masculine gender superior to the feminine one. Many instances of male dominance/female subjugation are evident in the language." This is evident in naming.

Children are named after their fathers, boys and girls bear their father's and not their mother's name as a surname. When women marry, they adopt their husband's surnames.

In a male-dominated society like Nigeria, androcentrism is to be expected. However, since government policies and international efforts are geared towards eliminating gender inequity in all ramifications, and since schools are societies' means of correcting social malaise, the persistence of androcentrism in higher institutions, especially in scholastic writings, is worrisome and deserves further investigation. This consideration motivated the study of postgraduate students' writings to find out the extent of the use of sexist language by male and female postgraduate students of the University of Calabar, in Southern Nigeria.

Methodology

The researcher applied to the graduate school of the University of Calabar, Nigeria for access to dissertations from four faculties: Arts, Social, Science and Education. Consequently, electronic copies of postgraduate theses were obtained from the Graduate School. From each faculty, 50 dissertations were randomly selected, 25 masters, and 25 PhDs. 200 dissertations were selected for the analysis.

Microsoft Word was used to search the gender terms, while an Excel spreadsheet was used to categorise and arrange the data for analysis. The key terms searched for were personal pronouns like he, she, him, his, her, himself, herself, except where they were part of a direct quotation. Other terms included man/men woman /women, boy(s), girl(s), lady/ladies, gentleman/gentlemen, policeman/policewoman, and fisherman/fisherwoman. The t-test analysis was done with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences. The frequency counts of gendered words and expressions were conducted. The percentage of each masculine and feminine expressions was calculated. This was used to determine if a particular dissertation had more feminine or more masculine gender referents.

Results

From the data analysis, the results are presented hypothesis by hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1. There is no significant difference in androcentric communication between Master's and Doctorate dissertations.

Table 1: T-Test analysis of the differences in the use of male referents between masters' and PhD dissertations

	VAR00 007	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Male Referents	M.Ed	113	41.74	20.87	1.96
	PhD	76	89.25	30.77	3.53

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff	Std. Error Diff	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Male Referents	30.68	.000	-12.64	187	.000	-47.50	3.75	-54.9	-40.09
			-11.76	120.8	.000	-47.50	4.03	-55.50	-39.50

The descriptive statistics show that the mean referents to male words and expression in M.ED dissertations was 41.74 with a standard deviation of 20.87 while male referents in PhD dissertations was 89.25 with a standard deviation of 30.78. A t-test analysis shows that the difference in male referents between M.ED and PhD dissertations is significant. In other words, there are more male referents in PhD dissertations than they are in M.Ed. dissertations.

Hypothesis 2. Male and female postgraduate students do not differ significantly in androcentric communication.

Hypothesis 2.
M.Ed and PhD students do not differ significantly in the number of female referents in their dissertations.

Table 2: T-Test analysis of the differences in female referents between master's and PhD dissertations

		VAR	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Female Referents		M.Ed	113	8.5221	5.92829	.55769
		PhD	76	58.2500	34.85212	3.99781

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2tailed)	Mean Diff.	Std. Error Diff	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Female Referents	389.7	.000	-14.86	187	.000	-49.72	3.34	-56.32	-43.13
			-12.31	77.9	.000	-49.72	4.03	-57.76	-41.69

Since the P.value of 0000 is less than the confidence level of 0.05, the hypothesis, which postulated that M.Ed and PhD dissertations do not differ significantly in their female referents,

is rejected for the alternative hypothesis. From Table 2, it is apparent that PhD dissertations contained more female referents than did M.Ed. dissertations.

Hypothesis 3. Male and female PG students do not differ significantly in the Number of male referents in their dissertations.

From Table 3, it is evident that male and female PG students differ significantly in the use of male referents in their dissertations. Therefore, the null hypothesis, which states that male and female PG students do not differ significantly in the use of male referents in their dissertations, is rejected, while the alternative is retained. This is because the P-value of 0000 is less than the alpha level of 0.05. It could be concluded that male PG students (Mean = 43.6) used more male referents in their dissertations than did the female students (Mean =13.08).

Table 3
T-Test analysis of the differences in the use of male referents between male and female PG students

Group Variable		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	
Male Referents	Female PG students	94	13.09	10.83	1.12	
	Male PG students	95	43.60	40.37	4.14	

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	t-test for Equality of Means					
	F Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff	Std. Error Diff	95% Confidence Interval of the Diff
							Lower	Upper
Male Referents	272.8 .000	-7.08	187	.000	-30.51	4.31	-39.02	-22.01
		-7.11	107.6	.000	-30.51	4.29	-39.02	-22.01

Hypothesis 4. Male and female PG students do not differ significantly in the use of female referents in their dissertations.

Table 4: **T-Test analysis of the differences in the use of female referents between male and female PG students**

	Group Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Female Referents	Female PG students	94	60.22	34.47	3.55
	Male PG students	95	118.20	76.36	7.84

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
								95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff	Std. Error DifF	Lower	Upper
Female referents	144.84	.000	-6.71	187	.000	-57.97	8.63	-75.01	-40.94
			-6.74	131.08	.000	-57.97	8.60	-74.99	-40.95

The result shows that since the P-value of 0000 is less than the alpha level of 0.05, the hypothesis that male and female PG students do not differ significantly in the use of female referents in their dissertations is rejected in favour of the alternative.

Therefore, male and female PG students differ significantly in the use of female referents in their dissertations. From the table, while male PG students used 118.2 mean female references in their dissertations, female PG students made a mean female referent of 60.2. The descriptive statistics tend to show that more male PG students than female PG students used female referents.

Discussion of findings

The study investigated androcentric communication among postgraduate students at the University of Calabar. Copies of postgraduate Masters and PhD dissertations were accessed and evaluated for sexist language. The results showed that there were more male referents in PhD dissertations than they were in M.Ed. dissertations. Also, compared to female PG students, male PG students used more male than female referents in their dissertations. In addition, more male PG students than female PG students used female referents. In summary, therefore, whether in masters or PhD dissertations, male referents dominate. Even female PG students used more male dominant language than female dominant language.

The findings cohere with Hegarty and Buechel (2006) as well as Orgeira-Crespo et al (2021). A possible explanation of the gender skewness in the postgraduate writing with the predominance of androcentric referents in dissertations revealed could be the lack of research report writing skills. The APA 7th Edition referencing style discourages the use of sexist language. Probably, the students were not familiar with such requirements. It is also possible that the dissertations merely reflect the saturation of gender-biased communication in the larger society. The generic *he* is still dominant in Nigerian speech.

Moreover, in some Nigerian languages like Efik, Ibibio, Igbo, Ijaw which are the predominant language in the South-South and South-East geographical zones where most of the students are drawn do not have pronoun differentiations for male and female. For instance, Efik and Ibibio languages have the pronoun "enye'' and "anye," respectively, to refer to male, female or neuter gender. Also, according to Ikegwuonu (2019, p. 252), "Igbo has no pronoun designated for common gender in third person singular pronoun." Therefore, the use of male dominate language may be evidence of first language interference.

Another reason why the dissertations showed male-dominant language could be from citations. Authors' surnames are usually used in in-text citations, irrespective of the authors, sex.

Therefore, some students may assume that a female author is male because of a male surname. But this could have been avoided if students were taught academic writing with attention to gender-neutral language.

Recommendations

The English language is the language of official communication in Nigeria. It is particularly the language of education and academic writing. Therefore, writing in the English M.Edium is likely to reflect the cultural nuances of the language and the society where the users operate. Androcentrism seems to mark the English Language. Studies have shown that from the M.Edia to academia, male-dominant language pervades communication. Since English is evolving and there has been a recent move to eradicate sexist language in formal writing particularly, a change of writing style, is likely to be effective through education. Therefore, the following recommendations are made:

1. Students should be taught to use the singular "they" where applicable or plural nouns rather than the generic "man" or the "s/he binary. For instance, students should avoid:

    "Any student who comes to school late will have himself to blame."

    Rather the statement should be rendered:

    "Students who come to school late will have themselves to blame."

2. Textbooks should be screened to eliminate books that perpetuate gendered language. Where some historically relevant books have gendered language, teachers should deliberately point this out to learners and intentionally teach the correct usage. The Nigeria Educational Research Council which produces curriculum materials for Nigerian schools, especially primary and secondary schools, should organise workshops for authors and publishing companies to acquaint them with the modern requirements for gender-neutral language.

3. Academic writing skills should be taught at all levels of tertiary education. It should not only be taught as a part of the Use of English and Communication Skills for undergraduate students in Nigerian universities, it should also be taught at the postgraduate level. Moreover, in-service training on academic writing skills should be organised by the ministries of education for teachers in primary and post-primary schools. University lecturers can benefit from in-service training and workshops on academic writing.

References

Adami E (2009). To each reader his, their or her pronoun: Prescribed, proscribed, and disregarded uses of generic pronouns in English" In A. Renouf & A. Kehoe (Eds) Corpus Linguistics: Refinements and Reassessments. Series: Language and Computers. *Studies in Practical Linguistics (LC)* 69. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 281 – 308.

Adejare, R. (2017). The central pronouns in Nigeria's 2015 presidential debate: A grammatical analysis. International Journal of English Linguistics. 8. 56. 10.5539/ijel.v8n2p56.

Andrus, S., Jacobs, C., & Kuriloff, P. (2018). Miles to go: The continuing quest for gender equity in the classroom. Phi Delta Kappan, 100(2), 46–50. https://doi.org/10.1177/0031721718803570

Battaglia, E. (2020), A Language of Silence. Analyzing the Effects of Sexist Language on Women's Classroom Experiences Honors Theses. 247. https://ecommons.udayton.edu/uhp_theses/247

Eyang, A. (2016). Historical allusions as stylistic strategy in the poetry of Langston Hughes. *LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research, 13* (2), 48-59

Eyang, A. E. & Edung, A. (2017). The Dynamics of Economism and Human Trafficking in Chika Unigwe's On Black Sisters' Street and Ifeoma Chinwuba's Merchants of Flesh. *LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research, 14* (2), 103-120

Forni, P.M. (2002). Choosing civility: The twenty-five rules of considerate conduct. New York, NY: St. Martin's.

Ezeifeka, C. R., & Osakwe, N. N. (2013). Gender representation in the 1999 Nigerian constitution: A critical discourse analysis for socio-political equity. *Discourse & Society, 24*(6), 687–700. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24441461

Fast, E., Vachovsky, T. & Bernstein, M. S. (2016) Shirtless and Dangerous: Quantifying Linguistic Signals of Gender Bias in an Online Fiction Writing Community. Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence (www.aaai.org). Retrieved from www.arxiv.org/pdf/1603.08832.pdf

Hegarty, P. & Buechel, C. (2006). Androcentric Reporting of Gender Differences in APA Journals: 1965–2004. Review of General Psychology, 10, (4), 377–389. 1089-2680/_1900/DOI: 10.1037/1089-2680.10.4.377

Hyland, K & Bondi, M. (2006) Academic Discourse Across Disciplines Linguistic Insights: Studies in Language and Communication. Editor Maurizio Gotti. (Ed)Berlin: Peter Lang

Ikegwuonu, C. (2019) An Exploration of Gender System in Igbo Language. Open Journal of Modern Linguistics, 9, 245-253. doi: 10.4236/ojml.2019.94023.

Johnson, A. P. (2016) *Academic writing: Process and product.* UK: Rowman and Littlefield.

Odekunbi, K. (2012). Gendered language: A case for the use of gender-related singular 'they' Journal of Qualitative Education, 8 (2), 1-7.

Olarewaju, E. O. & Babalola, E. T. (2016). Gendered English usage in the Nigerian newspapers. British Journal of English Linguistics, 4 (1), 1-18.

Opoku A. and Williams N. (2019). Second-generation gender bias. *International Journal of Ethics and Systems*, 35(1): 2–23.

Orgeira-Crespo P, Míguez-Álvarez C, Cuevas-Alonso M, Rivo-López E (2021) An analysis of unconscious gender bias in academic texts by means of a decision algorithm. PLoS ONE 16(9): e0257903. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0257903.

Stroi O. (2019). Gender-Biased Language of the Workplace. DISCOURSE, 2019, 5, (6), 120-131. DOI: 10.32603/2412-8562-2019-5-6-120-131

UNESCO. (2019). Global Education Monitoring Report – Gender Report: Building bridges for gender equality. Paris, UNESCO