A Socio-Pragmatic Analysis of Gender Matrix in Selected Yoruba Selected Kinship Terms

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Abstract

The concept ‘naming’ has been the focus of many linguistic studies, nevertheless, much as not been done on the gender matrix in naming. Therefore, this study examined the gender mould in the Yoruba worldview as portended in the socio-pragmatic meanings of selected Yoruba kinship terms (YKT). The Systemic Functional Grammar, a pragma-sociolinguistic framework was adopted. With this framework, twenty purposively selected samples of Yoruba kinship terms form the data of the study. A pragma-socio framework was employed. Precisely, Master Speech Act’ framework adopted by Ajileye and Ajileye (2003) and Benjamin Whorf and Edward Sapir Relativism hypothesis and served as the tools of analyses. The analyses revealed that YKT unlike the English Kinship terms is highly patriarchal and has meta-linguistic significations such as politeness, gender mould and definition of individual family relation’s responsibilities. Therefore, this paper recommends that, members of the Yoruba clan especially the male folks should not exploit cultural power to repress other household members but live-up to the honour and responsibility accorded them culturally. In the same vein, each family member should exploit power relations in developing the immediate family and the country, Nigeria at large. The paper recommends that the inherent positive gender values in the Yoruba Language and culture should be re-appraised, re-embraced and integrated in both formal and informal education.

Key Words: Yoruba Language, Yoruba kinship terms, Culture, Relativism Hypothesis, and Socio-pragmatic.
INTRODUCTION

The concept of gender roles is essentially cultural in origin. Sex is a biological and physical constellation, on the other hand, gender denotes socio-culturally constructed roles, behaviour, characters, activities and power considered appropriate for men and women in a society. Gender role is a pivotal constituent of development as it consciously and unconsciously programmes different sexes in its community to belief and behave in a particular way toward family and national development.

Kinship refers to the relationship between two or more persons that is based on common ancestry (descent) or marriage (affinity). Evidently, a kinship term (KT) is a kind of name used in signifying kinship relation. Although some linguists belief there is nothing in a name, on the contrary, this present study argues that the Yoruba kinship terms performs several metalinguistic functions. Therefore, this paper investigates the gender matrix as portended in the socio-pragmatic meanings of selected Yoruba kinship terms.

Theoretical Framework

Pragmatics and Sociolinguistics
Lawal (2003) posits that Pragmatics is a legitimate off-shoot of sociolinguistic approach to the study of language, and as a logical corollary, pragmatics evolved as a general study of how context influences the way we interpret utterances. According to Mey (1993:5), pragmatics is ‘the science of language seen in relations to its users… real live people for their own purposes within their limitations and affordances’. Pragmatics principles such as implicature, presupposition, Face Maintenance in relation to politeness in conversation and other mutual contextual beliefs (MCBs) as proposed in Adegbija’s ‘Master Speech Act’ framework are adopted for the analysis of the data of this paper. This framework is deemed
appropriate for this study as it is an incorporation of both sociolinguistic theory of meaning and pragmatic theory of meaning.

**Master Speech Act Framework**

Adegbija’s (1982/1985/1988) ‘Master Speech Act’ framework adopted by Ajieye and Ajileye (2003) is adopted for this study. According to this duo, this framework emanated from Adegbija’s reaction to Kempson (1977) who failed to suggest her own acceptable theory of meaning and failed to acknowledge the role of socio-cultural context in the analyses of meaning. Hence, Master Speech Act Framework fills this gap. It does, as it handles meaning at a deeper level and focuses on the global context of an utterance rather than just the literal meaning, and this provision makes this framework appropriate for this study. The framework considers three types of meanings which include: Literal/primary; Secondary Meaning and Master Speech Act or Global Meaning

**The Primary Layer**

This accounts for specific dimensions of meaning introduced through lexis, graphology, phonology and grammar in general. This level entails lexical semantic relations like polysemy, antonymy, tautology and the like. The meaning types identified by the earlier theorists, such as meaning postulates in componential analyses and generative semantics, fall under this level. Essentially, the focus here is meaning at word level. However, for the sake of the data of this study, entailment is treated as secondary meaning. Hence, at the primary level of meaning, this study investigates how some kinship terms possess meanings that can be decoded via their explicit linguistic features.
The Secondary Layer (Non Literal Level)

Decoding meaning from some Yoruba kinship terms also require identifying not only the denotative or direct meanings but also the indirect speech act; hence, this study accounts for indirect aspects of meaning inferable from immediate context of utterances. At this level, elements like implicature, pre-suppositions, entailment or literary uses of language, which go beyond the ordinary meaning of words, are accounted for.

The Master Speech Act (Global or Tertiary) Layer

Deduction of meaning at this level takes into account the non-immediate context of an utterance or discourse. The focus is the full cognisance of the pragmatic, social and linguistic context of language use. Here, the impact of factors such as historical, environmental, cultural and social and linguistic backgrounds is taken into consideration; in other words, the whole array of contextually relevant factors are salient at this tertiary level. Some Yoruba kinship terms, require an understanding of these entire contexts for their meaning to be grasped.

Nevertheless, the interdependency of these three layers of meaning is crucial for the analyses of YKTs because the understanding of the first level of meaning facilitates the grasp of the second layer, and the second in turn also facilitates the understanding of the tertiary or global level. This study therefore attempted to substantiate the validity of the socio-pragmatic features of Yoruba kinship terms.

Language and Culture

The concept ‘Language’ has been defined variously by different linguists. For instance, M.A.K. Halliday defines language as ‘… a system for making meanings: a semantic system, with other systems for encoding the meaning it produces’ (Halliday1985: XVII).Similarly,
Osisanwo (2004:1) defines language as ‘the arbitrary human vocal noise or the arbitrary graphic representation of this noise, used systematically and conventionally by members of a speech community for purposes of communication’. According to Gumperz and Levinson (1996:22) ‘Language is the link to the unconscious habitual thought….it brings causal influence from verbal cognition to non-verbal cognition (reality). Firth (1951) lending his voice on this, argues that ‘language is a way of behaving and making others behave.

Sapir, E. (1884-1939 cited in Cited in Thomas, L. et al 2004: 25) defines language as; ‘the purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols’. However, Sapir in conjunction with his student, Benjamin Lee Whorf, introduces another dimension to the earlier definition of language. They define language as:

As a vast pattern system different from others, which are culturally ordained forms and categories by which the Personality not only communicates but also analyses nature, notices or neglect types of relationships (Cited by Linda Thomas et al 2004; 25).

Thus, language is a ‘the system of arbitrary human vocal symbols or by means of which the members of the society interrelate in terms of total culture. At this juncture we shall define the term culture, since it is closely interwoven with language.

**Origin/ Definitions of Culture**

The term ‘culture’ has been defined by virtually all human disciplines; Anthropology, Biology, Sociology, Linguistics, and the like. According to Culture-Dictionary http://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/culture, the classical meaning of the term ‘culture’ originated from the Latin word ‘cultural’ denoting ‘to till the soil’. However, in English, the term ‘culture’ is based on the Roman orator, Cicero’s usage. In his Tusculum Disputation, he
wrote about cultivation of the soul or ‘Cultural animi.’ In this work, Cicero uses agricultural metaphors to describe the development of a philosophical soul, which was understood teleologically as the highest possible idea for human development. Thus, Cicero’s usage of the term, ‘culture’ denotes development of human soul to its uttermost perfection.

Samuel P. (1995), developing Cicero’s idea further, explains that culture does not only mean man’s natural perfection, but also ‘refers to all the ways in which human beings overcome their original barbarism, and, through artifice, become fully human’. This definition implies that culture denotes ‘civilization’ or ‘enlightenment’. In this vein, the 18th-century German thinkers, according to Velkley (2002), define culture as: ‘… the folk spirit and having a unique identity ‘as a cultivation of inwardness or free individuality’. Good Enough (1957 cited in Whaudauf 2011:222) defines culture as “whatever a person has to know to believe in and to operate in a manner acceptable to its members and to do so in any role that they accept for any of themselves”.

Ameh (2002:165, cited in Mahfouz: 2008:72) sees culture as:

- a dynamic phenomenon that encompasses the totality of attitudes, beliefs and world-views. It is an integral part of every human society and all social groups are characterized by it. In other words, it is that ‘complex pattern of behaviour and material achieved which are produced, learned and are shared by members of a community.

Furthermore, Malinowski (1944:1) explains the term culture as essentially an instrumental apparatus by which:

- Man is put in a position to better cope with the concrete, specific problems that face him in his environment in the course of the satisfaction of his needs. It is a system of objects, activities, and attitudes in which every part exists as a means to an end. It is an integral in which the various elements are interdependent. Such activities, attitudes and objects are organized around important and vital tasks into institutions such as family, the clan, the local community, the
tribe, and the organized teams of economic cooperation, political, legal, and educational activity.

From Malinowski’s dynamic point of view, that is, as regards the type of activity, culture can be analysed into a number of aspects such as education, social control, economics, and systems of knowledge, belief, and morality, and also modes of creative and artistic expression.

To Wardhauf (2005: 222), culture means ‘the know-how that a person must possess to go through the task of daily living…’ Furthermore, http://www.tamu.edu/facul defines culture as ‘the cumulative knowledge, experiences, beliefs values attitudes meaning hierarchies, religion, notion of time, rules’ and the like that a member of a community must know to be a responsible member of such a society. From the definitions above, it is evident that language and culture are intricately connected. These connections are classified as universalist and relativist theories.

**Relationship between Language and Culture**

The relationship between language and culture can been broadly categorised into two concepts: relativism and universalism.

**Universalism/Relativism**

In response to the question ‘Are languages different?’ The Universalist posit that all languages follow the same principle, and ‘the structure of every language is some variance of universal grammar, and human grammar is part of the human genetic equipment. Similarly, the cognitive system is genetically determined’ (Sebastian, 2002:161). Contrary to this position, Benjamin Whorf and Edward Sapir (1940), out of dissatisfaction with the Universalist position, developed the relativist hypothesis, which states that ‘all languages are radically different because they have unique grammar and uniquely structured lexicon which
represent a unique way of talking about the world and corresponds to a particular way of thinking. Therefore, each language represents, and causes a world view of its own’ (cited in Whorf 2005:339). The following passage from Whorf is often quoted as a formulation of the Sapir Whorf hypothesis:

Formulation of ideas is not an independent process strictly rational in the old sense but is part of a particular grammar and differs from slightly to greatly, between different grammars we dissect nature along lines laid by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomenon we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organised by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic system in our minds. We cut up, organise it into concept and ascribe significances as we do largely because we are parties to an agreement to organise it in this way-an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course an implicit and unstated one, but its terms are absolutely obligatory; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organisation and classification of data which the agreement decrees.(Whorf, 1956: 212-14 published 1940 cited Sebastian 2002:161)

However, Sapir-Whorf hypothesis fails to acknowledge that sometimes it is the world-view/culture that determines language and vice versa. This gap is filled by Bernstein, a British sociologist, who posits that language is something which both influences culture and is in turn influenced by culture. Furthermore, Bernstein (1972b:173) posits that:

…there is a direct and reciprocal relationship between a particular kind of social structure, in both its establishment and its Maintenance and the people in that social structure of language (cited in Whadauf, 2005; 339).

Commenting on the nature of the relationship between language and culture, Whorf, B (1956: 316 cited in Sebastian 2002:161) says language and culture have grown up together and that indeed the origin of language and culture are traceable to the same source and can be said to
have grown up together. Furthermore, Whorf says they both emerged as a means of using symbols to construct social identity and maintaining coherence within a social group that is too large to rely exclusively on pre-human ways of building community. On this note, Whorf concludes that language is not just as one cultural trait among many, but rather it is the direct expression of a people’s cultural trait’. Therefore, it is impossible to discuss a people’s culture without understanding their language, and vice versa.

Franz Boaz (1920:3) the founder of America Anthropology lends his voice on this subject. In his opinion, ‘the shared language of a community is the most essential carrier of their common culture’. Hence, Boaz implies that it is unimaginable to study the culture of a people without also becoming acquainted with their language. In fact, to him, the intellectual culture of a people is largely constructed, shared and maintained through the use of language. By this, he means that understanding the language of a cultural group is the key to understanding its culture.

This study agrees with the above positions that there is a symbiotic relationship between language and culture. On this purview, the study investigates the relationship between Yoruba kinship terms; the Yoruba culture and gender.

**Source of Data and Method of Data Analysis.**

Data for this study are selected standard Yoruba kinship terms. These terms were analysed with Adegbija’s pragma-sociolinguistic framework. Therefore, the data for this study are analysed at three levels of meanings established by the adopted framework; the literal meaning, secondary meaning and tertiary meaning. For the analyses of the first two levels of meaning, a table is drawn to present the data, while the deep/tertiary analysis is presented in subsequent paragraphs below the table.
Data Analysis

Twenty Yoruba kinship terms which form the data of this study are tabulated below with their literal meanings and secondary meanings.

Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Selected Yoruba kinship Terms</th>
<th>Literal Meaning (English)</th>
<th>Yoruba Secondary Meaning.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baba (father)</td>
<td>Father: a male biological parent</td>
<td>Father + male + biological parent + other adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iya (mother)</td>
<td>Mother: female biological parent</td>
<td>Mama + female + parent + other female adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Thus, mama entails every female, Woman old enough to be a mother.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iyawo/Aya</td>
<td>Wife: a married woman</td>
<td>+ female + married +</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oko-iyawo</td>
<td>Bridegroom: the husband of the bride</td>
<td>Oko + male + groom + lord</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>This referent term other also refers to every male from the groom’s family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iya Oko</td>
<td>Mother-In-law</td>
<td>Mother of groom/husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>This presupposes that the groom is a lord or a supreme being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iya oko</td>
<td></td>
<td>+ husband’s mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+ sister’s in-laws</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+ any other female from the groom’s family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baba Oko</td>
<td>Father-In-law</td>
<td>Groom/husband’s mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>This extends to persons related to one’s in-law(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Baba oko</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+ husband’s father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+ Brother-In-law(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Sisters-in-law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iya mama</td>
<td>Maternal grandma</td>
<td>Maternal grandma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+ sisters to Paternal grandma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baba mama</td>
<td>Maternal grandma</td>
<td>Paternal grandma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+ bothers to paternal grandpa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iya baba</td>
<td>Paternal grandma</td>
<td>This extends to sisters paternal to grandma aunties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baba baba</td>
<td>Paternal grandpa</td>
<td>This extends to paternal uncle(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ano</td>
<td>In-laws</td>
<td>Entails persons who are related to ones in-law(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egbon Baba/iya</td>
<td>Uncle/aunt</td>
<td>Entails anyone who is old enough to be an uncle or aunt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aburo Baba/iya</td>
<td>Uncle/aunt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omo egbon baba/omo egbon iya</td>
<td>Cousin</td>
<td>This extends to sons and daughters of other relatives that are old enough to be uncle or aunt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omo aburo iya/omo aburo baba</td>
<td>Cousin</td>
<td>Cousin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omo egbon/omo aburo</td>
<td>Nephews/nieces</td>
<td>This includes Young relatives (boy / girl )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omo</td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>This refers to both male and female children and not only biological sons</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discussion of the Kinship Terms**

**Baba**

The first item on the table is ‘baba’, which literally means ‘man’ or ‘father’; however, within the Yoruba socio-cultural context, it refers to every adult male. The semantic extension of honour and respect accorded a father shows that the male folks are highly esteemed and should be respected. By extension, right from birth, a male child is can be referred to as ‘baba’ (father or man) and should be seen so as the female folks. These analogous relationships in the Yoruba worldview is evident in the paradox ‘eyin ni di akuko’, meaning ‘the child is the father of the man’ and in the saying ‘kosi kekere okunrin’, meaning ‘there is no small man’.

**Iya**

The second item on the table ‘iya’ denotes ‘woman’ or ‘mother’. However, beyond this, in the Yoruba socio-cultural context, it refers to every female (young or old). This semantic extension emanates from Yoruba belief that women are powerful and precious, the age notwithstanding. In fact, the Yoruba eulogizes the woman as ‘Wura’, meaning ‘precious ornament’, while the men are simply eulogized as ‘jingi ‘mirror’. This implies that the Yoruba see the woman as an inestimable gem, while their male counterparts are means by
which human race sees its reflection. The presupposing fact is that women should not in any way be undermined

**Iyawo**

Item three ‘Iyawo’ or ‘Aya’ literally means ‘wife’ as indicated; however, this is a cover term for married women in general. This emanates from the Yoruba belief that a woman is a communal asset of her husband’s family. Therefore, any male from the family of a woman’s husband, age notwithstanding, can refer to another relative’s wife as ‘Aya mi’ (My wife). This perspective places a demand on a married woman in Yoruba land as she is expected to treat every male in her husband’s household with reverence.

**Oko Iyawo**

Literal means ‘the husband of the wife, that is, ‘husband’. Beyond this, in the Yoruba context, this term includes every male in the groom’s household, including young boys and suckling male children. This accounts for the reason why a fifty year old woman in Ijebuland, for instance, can afford to genuflect to greet a boy of five and hail him with the expression ‘oko mi’, ‘olowo ori mi’, ‘meaning my husband’; ‘the one who paid my bride price’. This extension further presupposes that every male is important and must be respected by women folk.

**Iya Oko**

‘Iya oko’ literally means ‘mother-in-law’. However, in the Yoruba context, it extends to sister(s)-in-law and young girls in the groom’s family. This semantic extension emanates from the Yoruba’s belief that every woman in the groom’s family should be accorded equal respect as the groom’s mother.
Baba Oko

‘Baba oko’ a referent term, like the previous term, is a descriptive term, and it means father-in-law in the English language. However, in the Yoruba language, it is further used to refer to brothers-in-law in general and every other males in the groom’s family, including newly born baby boy(s). This usage emanates from the Yoruba Patriarchy Worldview. In essence, the Yoruba culture is such that demands that males ought to be given outmost reverence.

Baba Mama, Iya Mama

These kinship terms literally mean ‘father’s mother’ and ‘mother’s mother’ respectively. These descriptions reveal the Yoruba solidarity spirit; one individual is described via the other because it is impossible for an individual to exist in isolation. Furthermore, these terms are used contextually to include all old people in a lineage that are old enough to be maternal grandmas and grandpas. This extension of meaning presupposes that any adult old enough to be a grandparent should be accorded the honour of a grandparent.

Baba Baba, Iya Mama

These are similar to the preceding terms except that they refer to paternal grandpa and grandma respectively. They equally extend to include all men and women in one’s lineage that are old enough to be one’s grandfather or grandmother. This extension emanates from the deep sense of politeness for the aged. On this note, young people are expected to treat every old man and woman like their own mother, father or grandparents. Hence, to a Yoruba man or woman, the aged are wise and are always right.

Ano.

This term as indicated on the table above literally means in-law(s). However, at the secondary level, it means ‘the one with whom I bargain’. This address term emanates from
the socio-cultural context of Yoruba marriage process, which is a family affair. The two families; the groom and the bride’s family are involved in a bargain. The bride’s family demands for a bride price on their daughter, while the groom’s family bids for a favourable consideration. However, aside the bride price, the bride family also requests that the groom family takes good care of their daughter. Hence, these simple agreements bind the two families and make them revere one another.

{Egbon iya /Egbon baba}{Aburo iya/aburo baba}

These descriptive kinship terms literally mean senior uncle / aunt and junior uncle and junior auntsies respectively. However, at the secondary level, this term entails every relative that is old enough to be a senior uncle or aunt and junior uncle or aunt respectively. The honorific ‘egbon’ presupposes that the bearer be treated with respect. This also indicates that respect and politeness are core values of the Yoruba language and culture.

{Omo egbon baba}{Omo egbon iya}

Literally, these terms describe a paternal cousin and a maternal cousin. In the Yoruba socio-cultural context, there is always a distinction between maternal relative and paternal relatives because the Yoruba kinship system is a patrilineal

Omo egbon mi/omo aburo

These kinship terms nephews and nieces, but in the Yoruba description, there is lineage distinction. Thus, there is paternal / maternal nephew / niece. However, there is no gender distinction as it is in the English Language. Furthermore, at the secondary level, this term entails other relatives that are in the age grade of nephews and nieces.
Socio-pragmatic

The Yoruba Kinship terms analysed above do not only perform communicative functions, that is, function only as referent terms or merely used to differentiate one individual from the other, they perform the socio-pragmatic functions summarized subsequently:

YKT indicate the bearer’s membership status in the society, whether as a wife, mother, father, niece, nephew etcetera they presuppose the idea of how people ought to behave towards other members of the family. For instance, the bearer of the referent term ‘iya’, that is, ‘mother’ is expected to be courteous and caring, while a father is expected to be honourable, responsible and possess the ability to take pre-eminence as the head of the family. In other words, bearers of the names are expected to act in accordance to the honour and responsibilities socio-culturally attached to their names

Moreover, YKT are veritable tools of solidarity. Most of the kinship terms analysed above are descriptive, and this descriptive structure emphasise the value communion of persons than on their autonomy. They reveal that the life of the individual is still very dependent on the life of the community/society as a whole. Hence, the Yoruba kinship culture emphasises solidarity order than individualism.

Conclusion

This study examined the gender matrix in the Yoruba worldview as portended in the socio-pragmatic meanings of selected Yoruba kinship terms (YKT). From the three levels of meanings: primary, secondary and tertiary, it was discovered that Yoruba kinship terms as against the English kinship terms are highly patriarchal and are no mere referent terms as they portend socio-pragmatic meanings such as the bearer’s social status, role-play,
behavioural pattern, and solidarity/politeness, gender mould and definition of individual family relation’s responsibilities.

On the above premise, this paper recommends that, members of the Yoruba clan especially the male folks should not exploit cultural power to repress other household members but live-up to the honour and responsibility accorded them culturally. In the same vein, each family member should exploit power relations in developing the immediate family and the country, Nigeria at large. Lastly, the inherent positive gender values in the Yoruba Language and culture should be re-appraised, re-embraced and integrated in both formal and informal education.
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