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Impact of Communication Filters on the Speeches of Female Yoruba and Igbo Speakers

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Abstract:

Differences in the ways that men and women use language have long been of interest in the study of discourse and sociolinguistics. Despite extensive theorizing, actual empirical investigations have yet to converge on a coherent picture of gender differences in language. The male/female sex biological categories are assumed to have a bearing on the masculine/feminine gender social categories. This categorization is assumed to affect almost every aspect of human living, including the use of language by the different genders. This work is a study of works and assumptions on sex-conditioned language or genderlect, with special attention on the characteristics of female speech. This aspect identified the observed linguistic filtering devices in female speech in an attempt to establish them as stereotypes. The study further attempted a survey of filtered female speech and established pragmatic bases for the models. A clear attempt was made to identify and classify the semantic constraints inherent in the connotative properties of the utterances of some female speakers of the English, Igbo and Yoruba languages while also attempting a possible literal and contextual interpretation of the utterances and the possible 'misunderstandings' that may arise from the 'filtered' utterances. Oral discussions and unobtrusive observations were conducted to get data related to the manifestation of genderlect in female speech. The findings affirmed the thesis of differences in gender speech styles.

Keywords: Genderlect, communication filters, speech styles

1. Introduction

Generally speaking, everyone has intuitive feelings about what sounds 'masculine' and 'feminine' in speech, even though it does not seem to matter much that it cannot be clearly pointed out what it is that assigns the speech form to one sex or the other. It is now a recognized phenomenon that in specific situations, men and women tend to speak in distinct ways. The observed differences between 'male' and 'female' speeches range through the various levels of language use. The fact of the existence of such a phenomenon has been variously researched and stereotypes have been identified and registered for the genders. Much of the research conducted appears to agree to the fact that there are certain assumptions that tend to impute certain social characteristics of gender to the biological categories of sex. In other words, there are certain 'masculine' characteristics about the biological category of the human 'male,' as there are certain 'feminine' characteristics of the biological human 'female.' Researchers from the mid-20th century have severally shown serious interest and have come out with various findings establishing the fact of gender-conditioned differences in language development and use predicated on the facts of gender differences. McCarthy (1954, pp: 452-456) suggests that sex-conditioned differences in language development begin very early, even though, in most instances, the observed differences are small. Other researchers, including Nelson (1973:38), Clarke-Stewart (1973), Dale (1976:310), Trudgill (1974, pp:84-87), Haas (1979, pp:616-626), Dowling (1981:55), van Baalen (2001: 1-10), and Baxter (2010) have variously asserted that basic differences in language construction and organization of experiences do exist as a consequence of sex differences. However, Lakoff (1973, pp:45-79) provides a major springboard for a generation of contemporary writers interested in language patterns and gender speech. His findings, at first thought to be controversial, indicate that there are certain characteristics that set female speech apart from that of the male. According to Haas (1979: 616), male and female speech styles differ in their form, topic, content and use. He gave further insight with some empirical evidence characteristic of the language of both genders. He indicated that men are "...more loquacious and

directive, use more non-standard forms, talk more about sports, money and business; and more frequently refer to time, space, quantity, destructive action, perceptual attributes, physical movements and objects" while women are "...more supportive, polite, more expressive, talk more about home and family; and use more words implying feeling, evaluation and psychological state." The modern English word *gender* is derived from the Middle English *gendere* or *gendir*, which was equally loaned from the Anglo-Norman and Middle French *gendre*. This, in turn, came from the Latin *genus*. Both words (*gendre* and *genus*) mean 'kind,' 'type' or 'sort.' The synonymous use of *sex* and *gender* (as a biological category) is widespread, although attempts have also been made to establish a distinction between the two categories. However, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women and men - such as norms, roles and relationships of and between groups of women and men. It varies from society to society and can be changed. While most people are born either male or female, they are taught appropriate norms and behaviours - including how they should interact with others of the same or opposite sex within households, communities and workplaces. In establishing a distinction, the WHO defines 'sex' as the biological and physiological characteristics that define 'men' and 'women' and that 'male' and 'female' are sex categories. A 'filtered speech' was defined by Crystal (2007:180) as speech that has passed through devices that only allow signals of certain frequencies to pass to alter its acoustic characteristics. The 'distorted' speech is often used in research into speech perception to determine the extent to which words can still be recognized after certain frequencies have been removed. For the purpose of this work, therefore, we would like to define *linguistic filters* as devices employed by a speaker to change the natural structure and components of a statement into another considered more tolerable to the assumed or known psyche of the listener while retaining the intentions of the original statement.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study takes into account the Difference Theory of sociolinguist Deborah Tannen. The theory was mainly propounded in her 1990 book - '*You Just Don't Understand.*' The Difference Theory is a theory that examines the effect that gender has on language use. The theory has roots in the earlier works of John Gumperz, who examined the differences in cross-cultural communication. It deals with cross-gender communication in which the male and female genders are presented as two separate cultures. In her development of the difference theory, Deborah Tannen drew on the work of Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker and their 1982 paper: *A Cultural Approach to Male-Female Miscommunication*, which itself also drew on the work of Gumperz.

The Difference Theory comprises six categories, each of which pairs a contrasting use of language by males and females. *Status vs. Support*: According to the theory, for men, the world is a competitive place in which conversation and speech are used to build status, whereas for women, the world is a network of connections and they use language to seek and offer support.

2.1. Advice vs Understanding

Women use language to seek comfort and sympathy for their problems, whilst men will seek a solution to the problem.

2.2. Information vs Feelings

The theory states that men's conversation is message-oriented, based upon communicating information, while for women, conversation is much more important for building relationships and strengthening social links.

2.3. Orders vs Proposals

Men will use direct imperatives ("close the door," "switch on the light") while speaking to others. Women encourage the use of super-polite forms, however ("let's," "would you mind if...?").

2.4. Conflict vs Compromise

Most women avoid conflict in language at all costs and instead attempt to resolve disagreements without any direct confrontation to maintain positive connection and rapport. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to use confrontation as a way of resolving differences and thereby negotiating status.

2.5. Independence vs Intimacy

The Difference theory asserts that, in general, men favour independence while women are more likely to seek intimacy. The essence of independence and intimacy is thus reflected in the speech of men and women, respectively.

3. Studies on Genderlect

Researchers have affirmed the dichotomy between male and female speech styles. Tannen (1991:2) was of the opinion that every human society has contrasting 'verbal rituals' for women and men. According to her, in Greek and Bali societies, women engage in ritual laments, which are spontaneously produced rhyming couplets that express their pains, while men in the same societies have different verbal rituals: a contest, a war of words in which they vie with each other to devise clever insults.

Male speakers are more likely to use socially unacceptable variants of sociolinguistic variables, while women are more likely to avoid these and use standard, prestige linguistic forms. This shows female speakers' tendency to use forms that are generally considered 'correct' or socially acceptable more frequently than male speakers. Men widely use

imprecatory words or exclamations to show their inner feelings, especially 'four-letter words,' such as 'shit,' 'damn,' etc., while women often use 'Oh, dear,' 'Goodness,' 'Gracious,' 'Dear me' etc. because women are, by societal constraints, not expected to use strong expletives, such as 'damn' or 'shit,' but are encouraged to use weaker ones like 'oh dear' or 'my god.' Below are examples that show the difference in men's and women's use of exclamations.

Oh, dear, you've put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again! (female)

Shit, you've put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again! (male)

This difference in linguistic acculturation between men and women gives men the opportunity to express strong emotions with impunity, while the woman are usually 'brought up' not to.

In a study conducted in 2004, Xuemei Wei examined the gender effect on L2 vocabulary acquisition strategies used by Chinese English as Foreign Language (EFL) university students in terms of total amount and breadth. He employed the Catalan's research method. 630 Chinese students from three universities of science participated in the investigation, which consisted of a questionnaire, an EFL proficiency test and an EFL vocabulary test. Results indicated that there were no significant gender differences between males and females with respect to the total amount of EFL vocabulary acquisition strategies they used. Significant differences were noted between them for the twelve discovery and consolidating strategies. The results were explained within the framework of socio-cognitive theory, which combined physiological factors with social ones, suggesting that the mastery and use of languages were closely associated with both of them. Contrastive analysis also revealed that participants in this research and those from other countries had much in common in their ESL/EFL vocabulary acquisition strategies, which might provide further evidence for both universalism and cultural relativism.

In another 2007 study to examine the gender differences in the use of linguistic forms in the speech of men and women, Azadeh Nemati and Jennifer Marie Bayer conducted a comparative study of Persian and English to determine whether men and women were different with respect to the use of intensifiers, hedges and tag questions in English and Persian. The researchers took into account Lakoff's (1975) ideas concerning linguistic differences between males and females. In order to gather the most natural-like data, six English and eight Persian film-scripts with a family and social theme were randomly selected from amongst all the scenarios available in two libraries of the University of Shiraz. In all, 9,280 utterances were studied. The data were then divided into four major groups:

- cross-gender, same culture,
- same gender, cross culture,
- cross-gender, cross-culture and
- cross-culture data

The results of the 21 Chi-squares computed showed no significant difference between the groups on the use of intensifiers, hedged and tag questions. The findings of the study did not confirm Lakoff's opinion regarding gender-bound language, at least in the three areas and the corpus inspected in this research.

According to Baxter (2010:24), "Men use speech to command and control, to get access to the floor, and once there, to keep it. Men are likely to use language for display purposes, asserting their dominance through verbosity, name-dropping, subtle or overt boasting, and entertainment strategies such as jokes and anecdotes. Women, on the other hand, are expected to listen to and be amused by men. On the whole, they are expected to agree and support, not to interrupt, challenge or question the authority of men. Leadership language remains masculinized and the property of males in current businesses." Rubrick (2014:np), in an online commentary, opined, "It is well-established, both by empirical studies and common sense, that men in general 'cuss' or 'use profanity' much more frequently than women do, and that women are more likely than men to substitute euphemisms instead." One interesting observation from the findings, however, is that some of the observed characteristics of female genderlect seem to reflect a subconscious attempt by the speaker to *filter* her speech in a manner assumed to be 'characteristic' of the feminine gender. The manifestation of the observed trends in the above studies and others is the main thrust of this study.

4. Communication Filters

We would like to define communication filters as devices employed by both a speaker and his/her audience to give a desired meaning to an utterance that otherwise would have a different meaning.

Speakers often consciously or unconsciously do change the natural structure and components of a statement into another that is considered to be more tolerable to the assumed or known psyche of the listener while retaining the intentions of the original statement. Filtering often involves both the sieving out of components of a sentence considered too harsh, too direct, too demanding, probably having the potential to offend and the introduction of linguistic components that are considered to possess softening, non-committal and manipulative properties; a simple re-organization of the simple order of the original statement; or a complete change of the entire components of the original statement. Filtering by speakers also involves a distortion of parts or the organization of an utterance to control the semantic output of the utterance and, thus, control the listener's reactions to it. Listeners, on the other hand, also engage in filtering when they selectively give meaning to an utterance based on their motivations, emotions and experiences.

Filtering is generally considered a barrier to the effective interpretation of an utterance with respect to the imputation of meaning. This paper, however, intends to examine filtering by female speakers as a deliberate exercise with the sole aim of manipulating the audience to accept the speaker's point of view.

1a. *Please, give me some money to credit my cellphone account.* (affirmative)

1b. *I have no credit in my cellphone account.* (filtered)

2a. *Give me some money for the market.* (affirmative)

- 2b. *Will I be going to the market today?* (filtered)
 3a. *I want you to leave before my parents return.* (affirmative)
 3b. *My parents will soon return.* (filtered)

The above (-b) examples would typically fall within the stereotypes created over the years for women in instances of indirect communication. Sentences 1b and 2b are filtered versions of 1a and 2a, respectively, with the direct, demanding part of the message filtered out. The filtered message gives basic information that presumes that the audiences are respectively capable of identifying and determining the communicative intent of the speakers indirectly soliciting money to credit the cell phone account for buying things at the market and that it was time for the visitor to leave.

5. Data

As a way of establishing the validity of this assumption as regards Igbo and Yoruba females, we solicited responses from subjects regarding how they would communicate the intents and equally observed real-life spontaneous communication situations involving female speakers of Igbo and Yoruba languages. The findings, as presented in **1c**, **1d**, **2c** and **2d**, confirm the reality of the trend.

- 1c. *Nna, credit m agwula o!* (filtered female Igbo)
 * (My man), my phone credit is exhausted! (gloss)
 1d. *Mi o tile mo pe credit mi ti tan!* (filtered female Yoruba)
 * I did not even know that my phone credit was exhausted! (gloss)
 2c. *O nwere ihe i na-achoro anyi iji a-gaa ahia?* (filtered female Igbo)
 * Is there something you are giving us for the market? (gloss)
 2d. *A ti nlo s'oja o!* (filtered female Yoruba)
 * We are set for the market! (gloss)

3b presents a more tolerable but unmentioned request for the hearer, a visitor, to leave the home of the speaker. The message point of the intended message is filtered out probably in the assumption that it might embarrass the receiver to outright ask him/her to leave.

Igbo and Yoruba samples present a very similar filtering pattern to that of English.

- 3c. *Ndi a ga ha alota e!* (filtered female Igbo)
 * These people will soon return! (gloss)
 3d. *Baba ko nii pe de o!* (filtered female Yoruba)
 Father will soon return! (gloss)

There are many other communication filtering devices observed to be often employed in female speech. These include:

5.1. Euphemism

This is a device used to cover up the harshness or ugliness of things and replace them with auspicious, kindly, polite and endearing names and terms. Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams (2011:473) attributed the creation of euphemisms to the existence of taboo words and ideas. According to them, a euphemism is a word or phrase that replaces a taboo word or that serves to avoid frightening or unpleasant or socially distasteful subjects. For example, most middle to upper-class females in the sampled all tended to filter the following sentences from 4a to 4b.

- 4a- *I want to go and urinate.* (declarative/male)
 4b- *I have to go to the bathroom.* (filtered/female)

Even those at lower levels of the social ladder employed the common euphemism below:

- 4b*- *I want to ease myself.* (filtered/female)

Samples from Igbo and Yoruba female speakers present some interesting findings. While the English sample is a clear case of substitution, the Igbo and Yoruba samples are somehow hyper-filtered by being completely silent about the intended action.

- 4c. *Biko, ka m bia!* (filtered female Igbo)
 * Please, I am coming!/Excuse me! (gloss)
 4d. *Mo n bo!* (filtered female Yoruba)
 * I am coming! / Excuse me! (gloss)

Euphemisms such as these are commonly used in female speech not just as cultural dictates but mainly as requirements of polite society and social etiquette. Conversely, Johnstone (2008:58) identified another kind of 'rewording' known as dysphemism, which he described as the opposite of euphemism. This class of rewording has to do with the deliberate use of 'hard' words with the intention of making a semantic impact. An example of dysphemism is the use of words such as genocide, murder and ethnic-cleansing in the place of **killing**. These and the trend identified by Fairclough (1992:193) as 'over-wording,' which refers to the use of many different synonyms in an utterance, were discovered to be features common to male speech.

5.2. Paraphrasing

Another unique communication filtering device observed in female speech is paraphrasing. This has to do with reconstructing a statement by the removal of emphasis or the replacement of the illocutionary point of a statement while, however, retaining the truth value of the original statement. One way of achieving this is by changing the linguistic voice of the original statement from active to passive.

4a - I wrote the letter. (affirmative/male)

4b - The letter was written by me. (filtered/female)

The voice of 4b is quite clearly softer and less aggressive and less arrogant than that of 4a. Equally, female speakers are also observed to often paraphrase their intended statements by defining the true value of the illocutionary force in the original statement.

5a - He is too short (declarative/male)

5b - He is not very tall (filtered/ female)

5c - *O di* a bit short! (filtered female code-mixed Igbo)

* He is a bit short! (gloss)

5d - *Buoda ti ko ga pupo yen!* (filtered-Yoruba)

* That uncle who is not that tall! (gloss)

5.3. Polite Interrogatives

Female speakers also often filter their language by employing polite interrogatives. This refers to the tendency to convert imperatives into interrogatives, especially in making requests. One clear effect of this is that it removes the command property in imperatives and makes all imperatives so filtered sound like polite requests with the option of refusal 'if not convenient' on the part of the receiver.

6a - *Get me that bottle of water.* (imperative/male)

6b - *(Please), do you mind getting me that bottle of water?* (filtered/female)

6c - *Ihe ahu o bu mmiri?* (filtered female Igbo)

* Is that thing water? (gloss)

6d- *Jowo, se e le fun mi ni igo omi yen?* (filtered female Yoruba)

*Please, can you get me that bottle of water? (gloss)

5.4. Generalization

This is another observed communication filter in the speech of the feminine gender. This paper considers it a manipulative device that involves the imputation of generalization to the actions in declarative statements as prods to get the receiver to perform the required action.

7a - *I would like us to go to Obudu Cattle Ranch next holiday.* (imperative/male)

7b - *Most men take their wives to the Obudu Cattle Ranch for holidays.* (filtered female)

7c - *Obudu unu a sef, ndi na-aga ebe ahu ha nwere isi abuo?* (filtered female Igbo)

*This is your Obudu. Do those who go for holidays there have two heads? (gloss)

7d - *Olorun maa se lojo kan ti mo maa lo si Obudu yen.* (filtered female Yoruba)

*God will one day make it possible for me to go on holiday to that Obudu. (gloss)

In 7c and 7d, the manipulative properties are manifested even though not with the generalization property.

5.5. Circumlocution

Another observed filtering device in the speech of the human female is circumlocution. As the name suggests, this involves 'talking in circles' about subjects they are unwilling to name for reasons that range from social or cultural constraints to dishonesty and the tendency to tell lies on the part of the speaker. There are also (usually) instances of language alteration in the form of word substitution.

8a - *I want you to come to my house tomorrow.* (imperative/male)

8b - *If you will be free tomorrow..., ehm...I don't know what your programmes are for tomorrow...* (filtered/female)

8c - *I ga-enwe ohere ibia n'ulo m echi?* (filtered female Igbo)

*Will you be free to come to my house tomorrow? (gloss)

**Ka anyi hu n'ulo m echi.* (Igbo male)

Let us see/meet at my house tomorrow. (gloss)

8d - *Mi o mo boya e maa le wa si ile mi l'ola...* (filtered female Yoruba)

*I don't know if you will be free to come to my house tomorrow... (gloss)

*(E) *wa si ile mi l'ola.* (Yoruba male)

Come to my house tomorrow. (gloss)

5.6. Self-inclusion

Female speakers are also observed to employ self-inclusion as filters for basic imperatives, especially those considered "too direct and commanding." The essence of this device is to 'mellow' the force of the directive through self-inclusion, even when it is quite obvious that the instruction is meant solely for the receiver(s).

9a - *You should not sit on that chair!* (imperative/male)

9b - *We are not supposed to sit on that chair!* (filtered)

9c - *I ga-enwe ohere ibia n'ulo m echi?* (filtered female Igbo)

*Will you be free to come to my house tomorrow? (gloss)

9d - *Mo ro pe won so pe ki a ma jokoo si ori aga yen mo...* (filtered female Yoruba)

*I thought they said we should not sit on that chair! (gloss)

5.7. Hedging

An interesting stereotype of female speech discovered in the course of this study is that of inhibition. It was discovered that female speakers tend to hedge in using some words or terms related to sex organs and/or the sex act. The researchers sampled an equal number of female Igbo and Yoruba subjects and all exhibited pronounced traces of inhibition in using sex-related words and expressions in their speeches. Moreover, to establish a counterpoint, we also sampled the same number of male speakers of both languages and cultures. The researchers worked on the assumption that the inhibitions observed could be traced to both Christianity and the Yoruba and Igbo cultures, which do not encourage the explicit use of sex-related terms in speech. It was, however, discovered that these influences had little or no hold on the male speakers as they more freely used the natural names of those terms and expressions in both English and the sampled indigenous languages, respectively. The females, on the other hand, resorted to euphemisms and paraphrasing, as shown in the following samples:

10 - Penis

10a - *Ihe nwoke* (filtered female Igbo)

*a man's thing (gloss)

10b - *Ihe ya* (filtered female Igbo)

*his thing (gloss)

10c - *Nnkan okunrin* (filtered female Yoruba)

*a man's thing (gloss)

11 - Vagina

11a - *ike* (filtered female Igbo)

*buttocks (gloss)

11b - *Ihe m ji buru nwanji* (filtered female Igbo)

*The thing that makes me a woman (gloss)

11c - *abe* (filtered female Yoruba)

*under, below (gloss)

11d - *Nnkan obirin* (filtered female Yoruba)

* A woman's thing (gloss)

The situation remained the same, with expressions having to do with the sex act. The male speakers were direct and even almost vulgar in expressing such acts, while the female speakers employed definitives and circumlocution to express those terms:

12 - They made love/had sex. (male)

12a - *O mere ya ihe* (filtered female Igbo)

He did thing (something) to her (gloss)

12b - *Ha nwere mmeko.* (filtered female Igbo)

*They had an interaction. (gloss)

12c - *Ha mere ihe.* (filtered female Igbo)

They did thing (something) (gloss)

12d - *Won sun papo.* (filtered female Yoruba)

*They slept together (gloss)

12e - *Won ni ibasepo.* (filtered female Yoruba)

*They had an interaction (gloss)

The above devices, among many others, are observed peculiarities of female speech. While it cannot be asserted that all female speakers employ these devices in all situations, we can, however, hold a position based on manifestation representative of trends. A review of the findings and the various classifications and explanations of each manifestation has the obvious advantage of helping us justify the existence of sex-conditioned varieties of speech. Beyond the conclusion that the human female speaks differently from the male, Lakoff (1973:45-79) provides further insight in his observation that women characteristically use more 'empty' adjectives that connote little meaning and have a 'fluffing' effect. According to him, some of these characteristics have the combined effect of 'watering down' female speech, rendering it less forceful, giving it a tentative, uncommitted quality and generally rendering it 'unserious.'

Dowling's (1981:55) position is that women use these emotionally manipulative devices to convey "some kind of softness." This 'softness' rather conveys connotative meanings that reflect attitudes, emotions and value judgments that are subjective to the speaker. In other words, the meanings conveyed are usually non-literal and tend to presume that the hearer shares an understanding of the speaker's intentions beyond the linguistic denotative meaning of the utterance.

5.8. Semantic Burden

From the foregoing, one can therefore posit that 'meaning' then will only depend on the probability of the hearer sharing an understanding of the connotation of the message, which, in turn, will only depend on a sharing of the attitudes, emotions and value judgments of the speaker in each specific situation. This is a great challenge to the meaning of discourse at both the semantic and pragmatic levels. The idea is to explore the constraints posed to the comprehension of the meaning of these filtered and 'watered-down' utterances at the conventional or literal level based on the hearer's linguistic knowledge. According to Saeed (2003:16), in what he called the literal language theory, "...non-literal uses of language require a different processing strategy than literal language. According to him, hearers recognize non-literal uses as semantically odd, i.e., factually non-sensical, but then are motivated to give them some interpretation by an assumption

that speakers generally try to make sense. The hearer then makes inferences to make sense of non-literal utterances. A basic assumption of this study is that fundamental differences do exist between the biological category of (male and female) sex manifesting in the social category of (masculine and feminine) gender and that these fundamental differences account for certain variability in the social behaviors especially in language construction and organization of experiences of the human male and female. It is further assumed that the human female stereotypically employs certain linguistic devices to filter and soften their utterances and that these devices pose a great challenge to the literal and contextual meaning of discourse. Finally, we are of the opinion that the understanding of such filtered utterances requires a different processing strategy from that of literal language. The nature of this work requires that the researcher interacts with a sample population for information that serves as data. The study is both linguistic and para-linguistic in nature, hence the need for written data used for analysis.

6. Conclusion

The samples presented here are by no means exhaustive; neither are they absolutely representative of female gender speech. They are rather representative of tendencies. A basic fact is that it is hard to categorize people on the basis of a few samples and to make a valid analysis of language use one needs to take extensive samples that cover individual differences, conversational contexts and the relationship between speaker and listener(s), among other variables. In fact, until recently, male use of language was considered the norm and women's language was deviant from that norm, thus being regarded as inferior to that of men. Far from that conclusion, this work, however, has established that some basic differences really do exist in the speeches of men and women across cultures and societies. This work noted differences in vocabulary use and conversational styles. While the reasons for the differences cannot be overtly identified, they might have to do with the basic facts of different social roles of men and women, the existence of social discrimination, social values and psychological elements arising from societal expectations. This work generally falls within a scope that will prompt and encourage further research into the subject from the perspective of many disciplines. Therefore, we would like to believe that the study will encourage further interest and work on genderlect.

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