

Sexist Linguistic Aspects in The Ngoni Language

¹Gloria Julius Kalla; ²Dunlop Ochieng

¹Department of Languages and Linguistics, St. Augustine University of Tanzania, Mwanza

²Department of Linguistics and Literary Studies, The Open University of Tanzania, Dar es Salaam

Abstract

Linguistic studies of the minority languages in Africa have focused on their classification, vitality, lexical structure, morphology and phonology. Secondary studies such as linguistic sexism are rare in African languages and absent in the Ngoni language, focused by the current study. Be that as it may, aspects such of sexist language are known to be the ideological tools to keep the patriarchal status quo where women are secondary to men. Consequently, the present study set out to examine sexist language in the Ngoni language so as to reflect its outcome on issues such as equality and human rights. This study was qualitative, guided by the Dominance Approach established by Dale Spender, Pamela Fisherman, Don Zimmerman and Candace West and Lakoff (1975). The study used interviews, focus group discussions and introspection to collect data. The findings of the study revealed the use various sexist linguistic aspects, such as sexist word order, names and expressions. The study proposes to encourage women and men to use gender-neutral expressions in platforms. Additionally, the study recommends establishing policies that champion non-discriminatory language use in Tanzania and beyond.

Key words: Sexist language, Linguistic aspects, Sexist behaviour, Female gender, Ngoni language

Date of Submission: 17-06-2026

Date of Acceptance: 30-06-2026

I. Introduction

This study focuses on sexist language, defined as a language which excludes either men or women when discussing a topic that applies to both sexes (Vega-Singer, 2022). Magnusson (2008) defines it as the usage of language which excludes or discriminates against women. It is a language that despises either males or females (Umera-Okeke, 2012). This study focused on sexist language, particularly the linguistic aspects aimed at despising or underrating the female gender in Ngoni, a language found in the Ruvuma Region, in Tanzania and it is classified as N 12 (Maho, 2009). The Ngoni population is estimated to be 258,218 people (LOT, 2009).

Several studies have focused on sexist language, especially in the English language (Demberg, 2014; Laine & Watson, 2014). Umera-Okeke (2012) and He (2010) assessed sexism in the English language and found that some affixes used for female are derived from men. For instance, the pronoun 'he' is used for both sexes and male names appear first in the word order. Moreover, (Driss, 2019; Oyeka, 2017 & Ahmad, 2009) explored sexism in Arabic and Igbo languages and forms of sexism that exist within languages. Sexist language was revealed in occupational terms, naming as well as other aspects of languages. Furthermore, some linguists identified sexist words, phrases and sentences in Kiswahili (MacWilliam, 1985; Rushubirwa & Ndimande-Hlongwa, 2014). Studies on Swahili have also reported sexism in various Swahili phrases which talk about women. Moreover, Buberwa (2018) and Saimon (2020), who studied the Haya and Nyakyusa languages revealed that sexist language is used in the names and expressions of women. These scholars noted that sexist language target women as compared to men.

In synthesising this section, scholars agree that some linguistic aspects are sexist by putting women at a disadvantage. The only gap left by the previous study is the uniqueness of these aspects in the less studies language such as the Ngoni language. The observation made by the researchers in this language indicated that the usage of sexist language has a very negative outcome but it is not documented anywhere due to the lack of research. It is in light of this background that the current research set out to explore the phenomenon in the Ngoni language to advance the frontier of knowledge of the previous studies and to address language agency against human equality.

Hence, the study may contribute to the emancipation of women from inequalities within societies. It is expected that it may raise awareness of the sexist language, specifically in the Ngoni community. This is based on the fact that language has the power to fight against such behaviour. Additionally, the study may contribute to the development of the Ngoni language. This is due to the fact that any language which is studied grows, if not, it faces endangerment (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2002).

II. Methodology

The data for this study were gathered from selected Ngoni native speakers in Ruvuma Region, Songea Rural District, particularly at Peramiho B and Lundusi Villages in Peramiho Ward. The data were obtained through interviews and focus group discussions. Using audio recording the researchers documented words, phrases and sentences about the topic of sexist linguistic aspects in the Ngoni language. 30 respondents were selected to participate in the study. The sample size was optimal and approachable. The groups of the respondents were selected by using purposive and snowball sampling. The participants were chosen based on gender and age. The study also complemented the two methods with introspection techniques. The instruments helped the researcher to explore respondents' opinions, behaviour, understanding, phenomenon and experiences which were applicable in the collection of various ideas during the study. The collected data were analysed manually by using Braun's and Clarke's thematic framework (2006). The data were familiarized, initial codes were generated, themes were searched, reviewed and defined and followed by the writing process. This thematic framework facilitated the collected data to be meaningful. The ethics of the study were followed. The letter for permission of data collection was obtained from The Open University of Tanzania. The respondents were given consent form to fill for their willingness to participate in the study.

III. Theoretical Framework

The study used the Dominance Approach. The pioneers of this theory are Dale Spender, Pamela Fisherman, Don Zimmerman and Candace West, as well as Lakoff (1975), who was also a believer of this approach to some extent. The approach stated that if there is a difference in language, it is like that because males have always dominated in both the home and workplace. Females are just playing the domestic roles. Dominance Approach argument was deemed very important for its comprehensiveness in exploring linguistic aspects which stereotype women in a language. The approach was applied to find out the sexist language in various linguistic structures in Ngoni, namely words, phrases and sentences.

IV. Data Presentation and Discussion

This section presents the data collected from the field and discusses the findings. The data collected from the field are presented and discussed in relation to other scholars' results. They are presented based on the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the study.

The study found that sexist expressions indeed exist in Ngoni. This was evident through the data obtained from a focus group discussion which showed the masculine reference would be mentioned first and the feminine reference later in phrases addressing women and men. For example;- *dadi na mau* (father and mother), *bambu na mau* (a man and a woman), *gogo na mbuya* (grandfather and grandmother) and *mdala na mgosi* (a man and a woman). Based on a linguistic point of view, when a male name always precedes a female name, such word order seems to be sexist. These results comply with the argument made by Ikaria-Maina (2013), who studied elements of sexism in the Gikuyu language. The study revealed sexism in word order such as son and daddy (*muriu na mwari*) and husband and wife (*muthuriwe na mutumia wake*). In the Gikuyu language, male names always come before female names. Similarly, Hegarty and Buechel (2006) identified men before women in the 16th century. It was noted that this became the appropriate word order to use because of the notion that males are the worthy sex. This syntax has continued with 'Mr and Mrs', 'his and hers' and the names of lovable couples, such as Romeo and Juliet from Shakespeare. It may appear that psychologically, we are still sexist even in writing since this is a relic of the 16th-century grammar. The findings of this study indicate that men or masculine characteristics are frequently prioritised above women, particularly in the Ngoni community. Therefore, the findings show sexist language which is used within our communities and it started some years back. It should be noted that sexist linguistic aspects cause doubts though they are normalised in language use.

Furthermore, the study found a number of sexist expressions directed to women in the Ngoni language from the focus group discussion. For example; *maharage ga kumbeya* (Mbeya's beans to mean, a woman is easy going), *ayingi ndindima ya kuchidala* (he enters ladies' toilet to mean he did a mistake), *ilongela kujo mdala* (he speaks like a lady) and *igenda ngati mdala* (he walks like a lady). Such phrases and sentences put a woman into disadvantageous position through her language. Men counterpart, are favored with their language. Likewise, Rushubirwa and Ndimande-Hlongwa (2014) assessed gender inequality and language reflections in African indigenous languages in South Africa. The study examined the IsiZulu and Kiswahili languages. The findings showed that sexist language is observed in words and phrases. In Kiswahili, there are phrases such as; he got a stove 'he got a wife' (*amepata jiko*) and a woman is a decoration of the house (*mwanamke ni pambo la nyumba*). Actually, such words and phrases impact the female gender negatively. Additionally, the notion of sexist expressions directed to women in the Ngoni language is similarly discussed in the Dominance approach explored by Dale Spender, Pamela Fisherman, Don Zimmerman, Candace West and Lakoff (1975) to some extent. They argue that if there is a difference in language, it is like that because males have dominated in both the home place and workplace. Females are just playing domestic roles. The approach shows that women are

dominated in language through the use of sexist words. Women seem to be invisible in language through various structures of the Ngoni language.

Moreover, the study found from the focus group discussion that women would be addressed by negative public references in the Ngoni community. They are included using their physical appearance. For examples of these are expressions such as *nungayembe* (unmarried woman), *kabwelikene* (a prostitute woman), *mdala mwe agandigandi* (a shapeless woman), *mdala lidaku* (a woman with big buttocks), *mdala mdumu* (a white woman), *mdala mtitu* (a black woman), *mdala chihimwisi* (uncivilized woman), *mdala mkata* (a lazy woman), *mdala mwe alekiki* (a divorced woman), *mdala mwe ibaba he* (a barren woman), *mdala avi na pamlomo* (a harsh woman) and *mdala avi na mavele gavaa* (a woman who has big breasts), *liburungutu* (a curvy woman). The use of similar expressions was reported by Demberg (2014), that female characters were described by using their appearance in the study. The above studies inform on the idea of using women's appearance to describe them. Due to this labelling, women can feel disappointed and unable to do their tasks independently. In the same line, MacWilliam (1985) explored sexism in Kiswahili. The study assessed various Kiswahili words and sentences. It revealed that sexist language is present in Kiswahili and that women feel bad to use the words. Examples of words are: beautiful (*kisura*, *kipusa*, *kibonge cha mtoto*). They mean 'a beautiful woman' but it is difficult to find such words for men. This situation suggests the use of sexist linguistic aspects in linguistic context. On the other hand, Dariaga (2023) examined the recurring sexist language in research articles published in Multidisciplinary Journals of Philippine. The study found 22 terms which were sexist; 9 generic nouns, 6 generic pronouns and 7 occupational nouns. Therefore, sexist language exists in different languages. Initiatives should be made so as to move to non-sexist linguistic aspects.

Based on the theme, marriage and naming expressions for genders, women in the Ngoni community seemed to be directed by sexist expressions when they want to enter a marriage contract. The data from the interview revealed that women are needed to take care of their husbands, to be obedient, to take care of their husbands' relatives as well as to respect their husbands and love them. This situation was also observed by Mosha (2012) who found that a woman is told to take care of her husband, to be happy every time her husband is at home, to be smart and attractive and to obey what her husband says. In the same veins, Mussa (2012) argued that the bride-to-be is told to be a good wife, tolerant, wise, charming, an adviser, the owner of the house, the controller of the family, the leader, the manager of the properties, the cleaner and the director of everything at home. Therefore, the above studies suggest that the woman is the one who is told to do many tasks for her husband, family and society at large. In contrast, the male counterpart is rarely instructed with related kinds of expressions when it comes to taking care of women. This suggests an idea that such expressions which are said to a bride-to-be seem to be sexist linguistically. Based on the findings, the woman is the one who is instructed by a lot of expressions and tasks to accomplish unlike men. Though it is difficult to note sexist language because language speakers normalise sexist language.

Additionally, women in the Ngoni were referred to by their spouse's names. The findings from the focus group discussion showed that, women are addressed by names like; *mdala wa Nchimbi* (Mrs Nchimbi), *mdala wa Haule* (Mrs Haule) and *mdala wa Mapunda* (Mrs Mapunda) in the Ngoni community. As it is in the literature, this usage ties women to their husbands, which is not the reference used for their husbands. Oyeka (2017) uncovered the same practice in the Igbo traditional society. The findings showed that women are renamed at marriage. They were sometimes referred to by the name of their husbands and children. The same applies to Igbo, where names of men remain as they are, and it is hard to refer to them as the husband of somebody, as has been seen above to be the case with Ngoni women. In the same line, Tan (2020) explored the causes and solutions of sexism in English language. The findings showed that women usually use their husband's surname after marriage. A man is always referred as Mr., before and after marriage but a woman is referred as, Miss., and it changes to Mrs., after marriage. The findings of these studies showed that a woman is married and renamed, unlike men, who use the same names. This situation seems to stereotype women as they change their names after marriage, thus being stereotypically referred to linguistically as the wife of somebody and other stereotypical usages. Although it is female gender negating, it is considered normal and sometimes a prestige in communities. This tendency influences women's dependency because they always seem to be possessed by their husbands like properties.

The data from the interview showed that the surname of the clan is always masculine in the Ngoni. For example; Gama, a popular surname in Ngoni which is a masculine for male and female children. The findings match, Mensah's (2023) study on the gender roles, patriarchy and naming of female children in Nigeria. The ethnographic qualitative study revealed that participants who conformed to traditional gender norms or ideologies tended to reify inequality and oppressive gender regimes through the choice of their names. Moreover, Firdous (2025) examined the degree to which language reinforces gender stereotypes and exclusion. The findings revealed that language perpetuates patriarchal norms. These findings of the study suggest patriarchy naming system which seems to be sexist from the linguistic point of view. The naming system can also be based on the other gender, which is the female gender.

Additionally, the study established that male children were given names of great positive attributes. The interview revealed that names included *Lidoda* (which means a strong male child). Other male names were great historical icons such as Songea, Mputa, Chabruma, who were the heroes in the Ngoni community. Unfortunately, such names were not given to female children. Similarly, Buberwa (2018) who studied sexism in Haya personal names, as used in the Haya community. The findings revealed that meanings of male names were associated with strong, famous, rich, winner, fighter and helper of the family. This is observed to be different to the female counterpart. On the other hand, Remso et al. (2025) explored a sexist language, the use of gender-inclusive pronouns. The findings showed men were higher in sexism and sexism was associated with stronger resistance toward gender-inclusive pronouns. Therefore, the findings suggest the existence of sexism in linguistic aspects particularly in nouns and pronouns. The communities should move to gender-inclusive terms.

Moreover, the findings from the interview revealed that female children are given surnames which are generated from masculine roots in the Ngoni community. For example, female surnames (*Nakomba, Nanchimbi na Nazenda*) are generated from masculine roots (*Komba, Nchimbi na Zenda*). The findings conform that of, He (2010) analysed sexism in English. The results indicated that some affixes are revealed to view women as derivations from men. Derivation morphemes -ess, -ette are evident in women's names like duchess, poetess, and ambadress while no morphemes are added to masculine names like ambassador, duke, prince and poet. These results suggest that female names are generated from male names. This idea can impact women negatively. They can feel that they are nothing in their language.

V. Conclusion

This paper presented sexist linguistic aspects in the Ngoni language. In this study; interviews, focus group discussions were used to gather data and introspection was used to assess the data given by the Ngoni native speakers. The results showed different sexist linguistic aspects that are sexist to women. These are such as sexist word order, names and expressions. Additionally, the findings indicated that sexist language is mostly used against women knowingly or unknowingly through the use of various linguistic aspects. This study, therefore, concludes that it is possible to replace sexist language. In this view, the study recommends that various language policies in the country should insist on non-discriminatory forms of language application. Additionally, gender-fair practices of language should be encouraged on women's and men's platforms.

References

- [1]. Ahmad, N. N. (2009). *Sexism in language*. BRAC University.
- [2]. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.
- [3]. Buberwa, A. (2018). Sexism in Haya language personal names selection. *JULACE: Journal of University of Namibia Language Centre*, 3(2).
- [4]. Dariaga, J.A. (2023). Sexist language in published research articles: Basis for a gender-fair training program. *An International Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, 3(1).
- [5]. Demberg, R. (2014). *Linguistic sexism: A study of sexist language in a British online newspaper*. Linne' Universitetet.
- [6]. Drissi, N. (2019). *A semantic study of sexism in English and Arabic*. Abdelmalek Essaadi University.
- [7]. Firdous, M. (2025). Linguistic relativity and gender: Does language shape sexism? A cross-linguistic study. *Liberal Journal of Language and Literature Review*, 3(3).
- [8]. He, G. (2010). An analysis of sexism in English. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 1(3), 332-335.
- [9]. Hegarty, P., & Buechel, C. (2006). Androcentric Reporting of Gender Differences in APA Journals, *Review of General Psychology*, 10(4). 1965–2004.
- [10]. Ikaria-Maina (2013). Linguistic sexism: A case of Gikuyu language discourse in Kenya. *International Journal of Science and Research*, 4, 438.
- [11]. Laine, T., & Watson, G. (2014). Linguistic sexism in The Times: A diachronic study. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 4(3).
- [12]. Lakoff, R. (1975). *Language and woman's place*. Harpers and Row Publishers.
- [13]. LOT (2009). *Atlas ya lugha za Tanzania: Language of Tanzania Project*. Dar es Salaam.
- [14]. MacWilliam, A. (1985). Is there sexism in Kiswahili? *Canadian Women Studies*, 100 (7), 1-2.
- [15]. Magnusson, S. (2008). *Sexist language: Gender marking of occupational terms and the non-parallel treatment of boy and girl*. Vaxjo University.
- [16]. Maho, J. F. (2009). *The online version of the new updated Guthrie list: A referential classification of the Bantu languages*. NUGL online.
- [17]. Mensah, O. O. (2023). Husband is a priority: Gender roles, patriarchy and the naming of female children in Nigeria. *Gender Issues*, 40: 44-63.
- [18]. Mosha, D. (2012). Lugha ya ishara katika dhifa za jikoni (kitchen party) nchini Tanzania. *Kioo cha Lugha*, Juz 15.
- [19]. Mussa, K. (2012). *A critical discourse analysis of kitchen party language*. Unpublished MA Dissertation, University of Dodoma.
- [20]. Oyeka, C. N. (2017). Sexism in names: A critical analysis of male and female names in the Igbo traditional society. *Ideal International Journal of Igbo Scholars Forum*, 4(1).
- [21]. Remso, A., Back, H., & Renstrom, E. A. (2025). A sexist language? Gender differences in attitudes and use of gender-inclusive pronouns. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 44(5).
- [22]. Rushubirwa, L., & Ndimande-Hlongwa, H. (2014). Gender inequality and language reflections in Africans indigenous languages: Comparative cases from IsiZulu and Kiswahili. *Alternation Special Edition*, 13, 390-410.

- [23]. Saimon, M. (2020). Sexist expressions in Nyakyusa. *Issues of Language Studies*, 9(1).
- [24]. Skutnabb-kangas, T. (2002). *Why should linguistic diversity be maintained and supported in Europe: Some arguments*. Strasbourg.
- [25]. Tan, X. (2020). *The causes and solutions of sexism in English language*. Risco Med Publishing.
- [26]. Umera-Okeke, N. (2012). Linguistic sexism: An overview of the English language in everyday discourse. *An International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies*, 1(1).
- [27]. Vega-Singer, A. (2022). *Sexist language*. B.A Latin & Greek.