# Attitudes of First-year MA Teaching Communicative Skills Students of UCC towards Gender Stereotyped Language

**Cletus Ganaa**

Liberal Studies Department, Bolgatanga Polytechnic, Box 767, Upper East Region

**Charles Daarta Nanglakong**

Liberal Studies Department, Bolgatanga Polytechnic, Box 767, Upper East Region

**Eric Galaa** [*]

Master of Arts (Teaching Communicative Skills)

## Abstract

This piece investigated the attitudes of first year MA Teaching Communicative Skills students of UCC towards gender stereotyped language and inculcate in them the right use of language devoid of stereotyping since these are people who are going to train teachers who will in–turn teach at the basic levels of the educational strata. The findings of the study indicated that the use of stereotyped language affects the addressee or audience psychologically and emotionally-making them feel degraded, abused, dehumanized and generally an insult to womanhood. In an attempt to reverse this trend or reduce the use of stereotyped language, it is suggested that gender-neutral or gender friendly language studies should be part of the school curriculum to be taught in schools to help students learn the right language devoid of stereotyping.

**Keywords:** gender, language, psychological, stereotype, womanhood and dehumanize

## INTRODUCTION

Gender Stereotyped language refers to the choice of words or expressions which are used to portray either sexes (male/female) in a certain light which could be denigrative or offensive. With the rise of gender activism, feminism and an increasing awareness of the offensive nature of stereotyped language, its use is increasingly being condemned both locally and internationally. Gender activists, civil society organisations and individuals have on several platforms condemned the use of sexist language. Both print and electronic media have also been criticized on several occasions for either using sexist's language or depicting either of the sexes in a certain negative light. For instance, in most media adverts, portraits of strongly and muscularly built men are normally used to depict durability and the quality of the product while portraits of slim and beautiful ladies are used to depict products which are less durable and flashy. Also, women are often

---

**\* Correspondence:** Eric Galaa, Email: Ericmgalaa3@gmail.com

portrayed in many adverts, especially in alcoholic beverage adverts in a sexy way, and these are offensive, especially to the female sex.

The influence of context (local and global), social factors other than gender (ethnicity, age, socio-economic status), and issues of power have also been found to play a role in how men and women use language. This makes the use of stereotyped language distasteful to many people and hence it's being frowned upon both locally and internationally.

Robin Lakoff's Language and Woman's Place (LWP), published in 1975 was one of the first publications of its time to address the relationship between language and gender.

As a result, LWP served as the impetus for both linguists and feminists alike to look more closely at gender variation in language. Many studies expanded on Lakoff's argument that language embodies gender inequity. As stated in LWP, there is a direct correlation between the inequity in language and the inequity in men's and women's social statuses. "Women's language", a term coined by Lakoff, became a commonly used identifier among language and gender researchers. According to Lakoff, women's language describes how women use language and how language is used to talk about women, which both position women as powerless. This position has been adopted by a number of sociolinguistics and feminists. In an effort to support Lakoff's rationale with empirical evidence (Lakoff's argument was based entirely on personal observation), many studies focused on identifying and quantifying the linguistic resources that men and women utilize when they speak.

 The use of stereotyped language therefore has a lot of implications for language teachers and communicators. This is because they are imparting not only knowledge to their learners or audience but also, attitudes and behaviours as well. Therefore, if teachers or and communicators are not aware of, and avoid sexist language, it is likely to have a trickle-down effect on their students, audience and society as a whole who see teachers as role models. It is against this background that this study is being carried out to ascertain the attitude of first year (MA Teaching Communicative Skills) students of the University of Cape Coast (UCC) towards gender stereotyped language.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

Gender stereotyped language may have an enormous psychological effect on the addressee or the audience. It also affects effective communication and may lead to breakdown of the conversation between the parties with its implications for families, businesses, organizations, and society as a whole. The use of such expressions as "baby", "a new catch", "backyard garden", "laptop" etc.to refer to intimate relationships with women or men is demeaning and derogatory. Instead of focusing solely on speakers and the linguistic resources they employ, this study also investigates how speakers are evaluated by listeners. The argument for such an approach regards it as insufficient to invest all of our attention into how gender stereotypes are perpetuated by the speaker alone (for example, because a woman uses linguistic feature X, she is, as Lakoff would claim, weak or ineffectual). It is also necessary to consider a listener's attitude towards the man or woman speaking, as the interpretation of speech can have significant

implications for the nature of social relationships. Unfortunately, these are realities in our society. This however has a lot of implications for the reputation of Ghana among the community of these nations.

It is therefore imperative that pragmatic efforts are taken to avoid or at least reduce the use of stereotyped language in order to save the image of the country. It is against this back- drop that this study is carried out to find out the attitudes of first year MA Teaching Communicative Skills students of UCC towards gender stereotyped language and inculcate in them the right use of language devoid of stereotyping since these are people who are going to train teachers who will in–turn teach at the basic levels of the educational strata.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study seeks to:

1. Find out the form gender stereotyped language takes.

2. Ascertain the effects of gender stereotyped language on the addressee.

3. Investigate how speakers are evaluated by listeners.

4. Find possible solutions to reduce the use of gender stereotyped language.

The study seeks to find answers to the following questions:

1. What form does gender stereotyped language take?

2. How does gender stereotyped language affect addressees/audience?

3. How do the audience evaluate users of stereotyped language?

4. What can/should be done to reduce the use of stereotyped language?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The research questions posed in this proposal address Lakoff's claim in LWP that certain linguistic features have very specific gendered connotations. In her discussion of women's language, Lakoff describes features such as tag questions ("this election mess is terrible, isn't it?"), rising intonation on declarative statements (responding to a request for the time with "Six o'clock?") and hedges ("That's kinda sad", or "I'm sort of angry with you"), all of which function to mitigate a woman's position. For example, according to Lakoff's argument, a tag question usually indicates a speaker's uncertainty or lack of commitment to what is being said. It would follow then, based on Lakoff's theory, that women use more tags than men since they are "weaker" and, thus, less likely to make an unmitigated statement.

 However, based solely on her own observations and introspection, many sought to support her statements with empirical evidence. Fishman (1980), a well-known study about women's interactional "work", focused on how the verbal interaction between intimate heterosexual couples created and maintained the hierarchical social relationship between men and women. Positioned within Lakoff's framework that identifies certain linguistic resources as functioning solely to weaken the speaker's

position, Fishman's analysis suggests that women work harder than men in interaction, and that interaction between men and women is most often on men's terms. The data consisted of over fifty hours of interaction between couples in their homes, and revealed that women ask more questions and use more devices described as insuring rights to speak (saying "D'ya know what?" at the beginning of a conversation) and establishing interest ("This is interesting" as an introduction to a topic) than men.

Furthermore, according to Fishman, men and women used minimal responses (using words such as "uh-huh" and "right" while someone is talking - also known as back channelling) quite differently – for women, it is "support work" used to indicate that they are attending to their male partner's speech. But for men, Fishman states, the use of this device shows a lack of interest in what the woman is saying.

Additionally, Fishman found that men made more statements that received a response (such as a lengthy conversation) than women did. Many, if not most, of women's statements did not get a response from men which, for Fishman, implies that men only engage in conversation on their own terms. While it is ideal to investigate language use within real interaction as Fishman did, as opposed to a context-free vacuum, the analysis of Fishman's data is problematic. Details about the context in which the interactions occurred are completely disregarded. In her analyses, Fishman mapped salient gender stereotypes (for example men are dominant, while women are childlike) onto linguistic forms and provided no other possibilities for interpretation of these interactions. It was revealed that women used devices to ensure their right to speak twice as often as men and to establish interest in a subject thirty-four times compared to men's three times; however, men did employ these devices (albeit less often), so it cannot be said that only women used them.

Unfortunately, the analyses give no explanation as to the function these devices had for men within the interactions, regardless of how infrequently they occurred. Instead, Fishman focused solely on frequency and argued that since women used these devices more often than men, they must function to keep women "in their place" (that is, in a powerless position). It is essential to language and gender research to explore which linguistic features, if any, are used more often by men or women. Nevertheless, it is also crucial to examine closely the social contexts in which interactions occur, including the backgrounds of the participants and the nature of the relationship. Otherwise, the analyses are missing a large part of the story behind why a person uses the language he or she uses. Much of the early analyses of discourse between men and women interpreted data through a lens that already perceived women as powerless and men in control. As a result, whatever women do in interaction – whether it is more or less often than men – is explained in terms of how it perpetuates women's subordinate position. This interpretation assumes homogeneity of the gender category and omits the significance of other factors that play into one's social identity (socio-economic status, race, age, etc.).

As previously noted, the main strength of research like (Fishman, 1980) is the use of real interaction for the collection of data. It takes Lakoff's claims one step further by applying them to the real world and measuring them quantitatively; however, we also see how such analyses can limit the possible interpretations by not considering social context and

participant background, as well as the multifunctionality of linguistic features. Unfortunately, there is little point in collecting data in a "real" context if that context is going to be disregarded in the interpretation. To address this, several studies introduced alternative interpretations of the features Lakoff labelled "women's language" (Cameron, et al (1988); O'Barr and Atkins (1980); Zimmerman and West (1975; 1983)). In an article entitled "Lakoff in context: social and linguistic functions of tag questions", Cameron et al (1988) examine numerous functions that a tag question can have, depending on its form and context.

 Citing the now obvious weakness of LWP's lack of empirical evidence, Cameron et al conducted a study based on the analyses of Holmes (1984) which identified two main functions of tag questions: modal and affective. The objective was to prove that Lakoff's definition of the mitigating function of tags is too restrictive and that tags do not necessarily signify tentativeness or weakness. In their attempt to label the tags found in their data, Cameron et al discovered the problematic nature of such labels. In actuality, several of the tag examples in their data appeared to serve many functions simultaneously. Thus, the study suggests that the link between linguistic function and form is not invariant, as both Lakoff and Fishman had implied. Additionally they stress the importance of considering factors other than gender when analysing linguistic patterns.

 These include the role taken by participants in interaction, the objectives of the interaction, and participants' relative status on a number of dimensions; and so on...Gender is cross-cut with other social divisions and their relative importance is affected by the specifics of the situation (p.47). Also interesting in this study is the implication that the use of a tag as a conversation facilitator – that is, as a way to initiate a response from someone – is actually a marker of conversational control, rather than a device that a subordinate speaker uses to keep the conversation going. In fact, Cameron et al suggest that the use of such a linguistic device could be a way of coping with oppressive conditions or even resisting them. What studies like this reveal is that it is problematic to only consider subordination and weakness when identifying women's language. It is more probable that there are other elements playing a role in speech patterns. O'Barr and Atkins (1980), in their study of the speech of courtroom witnesses, propose that women's language is actually powerless language, and that many of the linguistic features identified by Lakoff as components of women's language are in fact used by people (men and women) who are in a socially powerless role within a specific context (witness in a courtroom, for example). Based on more than 150 hours of recorded testimony from various witnesses, they discovered that not all women use Lakoff's features and that some men do, and that it often depended on one's socio-economic status, experience, and/or occupation. Thus, so-called "women's language" is a reflection of social position, and "using this type of language...tends to feedback into the social situation" (p.110). So, once again, we see a divergence from the original hypothesis that Lakoff presents in LWP, and the complexity of the interaction between language, social context, and participants becomes more evident. The value of Lakoff's argument is certainly not being disputed in the studies reviewed here. Rather, their results exemplify

how essential the publication of LWP was in serving as an impetus for the study of language and gender.

More questions have been asked about the relationship between language and gender, and as we attempt to answer them, it becomes apparent that the answers are not simple. With each "phase" of research, new elements are being considered in terms of their influence on language choices and patterns. This leads to more sophisticated and intricate interpretations. In fact, several studies have taken the work of Lakoff, Fishman, etc. even further by adding another dimension to the analysis – perception (Erickson et al (1978); Batstone & Tuomi (1981); Strand (1999); Delph-Janiurek (1999; 2000)). Perception in all of these cases except for Strand (1999), and for purposes of this research, refers to an "outside" listener's interpretations of a speaker's language and/or personality based (primarily) on the speaker's language style In Strand (1999), however the term perception refers to the cognitive processing of acoustic cues from speech input and does not involve the evaluation of the speaker's personality.

In one of the earliest studies using perception to explore the relationship between language and gender, Erickson et al. (1978) found that, in a courtroom context, speech incorporating women's language (or "powerless language" as they refer to it) was evaluated negatively regardless of the speaker's gender. Batstone & Tuomi (1981) discovered that men and women identified the same characteristics in women's speech, but rated these characteristics differently in terms of salience. In a more recent study, Strand (1999) explored how certain "triggered" judgments about a speaker play a role in the perception of language. Conducting a phonetic experiment, Strand considered the gender-related variability in the production of the fricatives [s] and [s] for the phoneme /s/. Though there is little physiological evidence for the difference between men and women's production of these sounds (women have been observed as producing the voiceless alveolar fricative in different manners – women's production is closer to [s], whereas men's production is more like []), Strand acknowledges that something is factoring into the variation between the two. She argues that children are socialized to produce the form "appropriate" for their gender. Furthermore, listeners, based on such socialization, have very specific expectations of speakers and organize the input as quickly as possible, based on stereotypes.

What implications does this have for gender? Geis (1993, as cited in Strand 1999) states that stereotypes enhance perceptions, interpretations and memories that are consistent with stereotypical attributes and obscure, diffuse, or cause us to disregard or forget information that is inconsistent with them...Thus, even when women and men behave alike; we see them as different (p. 95).

## METHODOLOGY

This session focuses on the sources of data collected, population, sample and sampling methods, instruments to be employed in data collection, research design and the procedure – which provides a detailed and accurate statement of steps taken in the collection of data.

This study is basically qualitative in design where interview and participant observation are used in data collection. In doing this, the researcher prepared an interview guide to help interact and elicit information from the respondents (interviewees). On observation, the researcher used participant observation where the researcher will be deeply involved in the activities of the group as the researcher gathers the data needed for the study.

## Sources of data

Both primary and secondary data sources were used. The primary data collected from the field (class), while the secondary data sources included published books, the Internet, journals and research articles.

## Population, sampling unit and sampling method

The target population of this study was the 2016/2017 batch of MA Teaching Communicative Skills students. The sampling unit of the study were five male and five female students of the batch under study. Also, a sampling method employed was the non-probability method, involving purposive sampling.

## RESULTS

This section presents the data gathered from the interview conducted and the observations made about the respondents under study. It also incorporates some observations about stereotyped language used a by society in general. Finally, it discusses the data presented.

**Table 1:** Forms of stereotype

| Forms of stereotype | Phrases | Clauses | Adjectives |
|---|---|---|---|
| Male | 3 | 0 | 2 |
| Female | 2 | 1 | 2 |

**Table 2:** Effects of stereotypes on addressees/audience

| Effects on addressees/audience | Positive | Negative | Neutral |
|---|---|---|---|
| Male | 3 | 1 | 1 |
| Female | 2 | 3 | 0 |

**Table 3:** Evaluation of stereotype users by audience

| Evaluation of users | Civil/good | not civil (demeaning) | Neutral |
|---|---|---|---|
| Male | 4 | 1 | 0 |
| Female | 1 | 3 | 1 |

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

From table one; it is observed that three males expressed stereotype language in phrases while two females used phrases to express stereotype language. The study also revealed that only one of the females interviewed used clause to express gender stereotype language while no male used a clause to express stereotype language. Two males and two females however were found to have used adjectives in expressing stereotyped language.

In table two; it is observed that three males and two females respectively, had positive attitudes towards gender stereotyped language while one male and three females had a negative attitude towards stereotyping, seeing it as denigrating and demeaning. Also, only one male remained neutral, seeing stereotyping as neither good nor bad.

In table three; four males and a female saw the users of stereotyped language to be civil. However, three females and one male evaluated users of stereotyped language as not civil while one female respondent remained neutral to the proposition.

From the analysis, it is evident that a majority of the respondents expressed gender-based language in phrases. Some of the phrases commonly used are: 'my baby', 'my honey', 'laptop', 'my chick', 'my girl' to even refer to an adult woman. Some adjectives are also used to express stereotype language-'beautiful apple', 'baby' and 'backyard garden'-many of which are attributed to women. Again, from the analysis above, it is evident that majority of males had positive attitude towards gender stereotyped language use-seeing nothing wrong with it, other than their female counterparts, a majority of who see stereotyped language as negating, derogatory and demeaning to womanhood. Out of the ten respondents interviewed, five (four males and one female) evaluated the users of stereotyped language as civil or good. Also, four respondents (three females and one male) evaluated the users of stereotyped language as uncivilised and abusive.

Based on the analysis, the study found out that, phrases, other than other grammatical ranks are the most common items through which gender stereotyped language is expressed. Again, the findings of the study indicate that a majority of males have a positive attitude towards or are in support of gender stereotyping while a majority of females condemn the use of gender stereotyped language. Since a majority of people are in support of its usage, there is the likelihood that, its usage will continue and thereby have a trickle-down effect on society because most of the respondents are people who are going to train teachers who will in turn teach at the basic levels. The findings of the study also indicate that the use of stereotyped language affects the addressee or audience psychologically and emotionally-making them feel degraded, abused, dehumanized and generally an insult to womanhood.

In an attempt to reverse this trend or reduce the use of stereotyped language, it is suggested that gender-neutral or gender friendly language studies should be part of the school curriculum to be taught in schools to help students learn the right language devoid of stereotyping. Finally, the study calls for enough education or awareness creation with in society on the usage of stereotyping language. Also, further research needs to be done in this field to add to the existing body of knowledge in the subject under study.

## REFERENCES

Batstone, S. and Tuomi, S. K. (1981). *Perceptual characteristics of female voices:Language and Speech.* Appalachian English, USA.

Cameron (eds) (1989)*. Women in their Speech Communities; New perspectives on language and Sex;* Longman, London.

Delph-Janiurek, T. (1999). *Sounding gender (ed): vocal performances in English university teaching spaces. Gender, Place and Culture*, 6:137-153.

Delph-Janiurek, T. (2000). *'Walking the walk and talking the talk': bodies, conversation, gender and power in higher education in England. Social & Cultural Geography*, 1:83-100.

Ericson et al (1978). *Speech style and impression formation in a court setting: The effects of "Powerful" and "Powerless" Speech*. Journal of Experimental Society Psychology, 14, 266-279.

Fishman, P. (1980). "Conversational insecurity" in Cameron, D. (ed.) (1990). *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader.* Routledge: London.

Holmes, J. (1984). *Hedging your bets and Sitting on the fence: Some evidence for hedges as Support Structures,* Te Reo, 27, 47-62.

Lakoff, R. (1995). *Language and Women's Place*. Harper & Row: New York.

O'Barr, W. Atkins, B. (1980). *"Women's Language" or "Powerless Language"* cited in McConnel, S.; Ginet et al (eds) (1980). Women and Language in Literature and Society. New York.

Strand, E. A. (1997). *The role of gender Stereotypes in Speech Perception*. Paper Presented at the NWAVIE, 26 meeting, Quebec City, Quebec.

Strand, E.A. (1999). *Uncovering the role of gender Stereotypes in Speech Perception*. Journal of language and Social Psychology. Ohio State University, Department of Linguistics.

Zimmerman, D. & West C. (1975). *"Sex roles, interruptions and Silences in Conversation"* cited in Thorne, B. & Henley, N. (eds) (1975). Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance. Masschusetts: Newbury House.