

Factors Contributing to Gender Differences in Language use During Bukusu Marriage Ceremonies in Bungoma County

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Abstract

This study sought to examine the factors contributing to gender differences in language use during Bukusu marriage ceremonies in Bungoma County. Discursive practices provide context through which language is used. Some of the cultural practices, such as Bukusu customary marriages, which provide context for language use, more often than not perpetuate gender differences in language. Purposive sampling was used to select 40 respondents in four marriage ceremonies. Data was collected from all four key stages of a Bukusu marriage ceremony on a cross-sectional basis. Data was collected through direct observations during marriage ceremonies, in-depth interviews with respondents, and focus group discussions. The study was informed by Ruth Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA). The data was translated, transcribed and analysed to identify the factors behind gender differences in language use. The findings indicate that gender differences in language use during Bukusu customary marriage ceremonies in the Kimilili sub-county are shaped by societal expectations, cultural heritage, traditional gender roles, socialisation and gendered power dynamics. The study is important as it explores gendered language in Bukusu marriage ceremonies, shedding light on how language reinforces gender norms. It will fill a research gap and contribute to promoting gender equality by informing strategies for inclusive language use in various settings.

Key terms: Cultural norms, femininity, gender, identity, masculinity, roles.

INTRODUCTION

Language is the primary means of communication, conveying information and embedding social norms within any society. The way people use language, both formal and informal, is deeply influenced by culture (Smagulova, 2008). Gender plays a crucial role in language use, as it is embedded in nearly all aspects of society. According to Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2013), as cited in Wardhaugh (2006), gender categories strongly influence behaviour, making it challenging to navigate life without exhibiting gendered behaviour. Gender shapes identity, affecting how individuals perceive themselves and how others perceive them through language and social interactions.

Discursive practices, which are ways in which language constructs social meaning, are vital in reinforcing or challenging gender norms. In the context of Bukusu customary marriages, these practices perpetuate gender differences in language use, reflecting and shaping notions of masculinity and femininity. Language, while not inherently powerful, serves as a tool to challenge or reinforce societal power dynamics (Weiss & Wodak, 2003). Wodak (2015) argues that texts and discourses are often battlegrounds for social struggles and ideological conflicts.

In Bukusu, in customary marriage ceremonies in the Kimilili sub-county, gendered language use is influenced by tradition, social beliefs, and normative practices. These differences align with the gender roles within the Bukusu community and are evident in both formal and informal speech patterns during these cultural events. Understanding these discursive practices is essential for grasping the social dynamics in Bukusu marriage ceremonies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender differences in language use are shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, social and physiological factors (Akhter, 2014). These factors include politics, social status, roles, relationships, language usage and educational levels, as well as

inherent physiological differences like vocal cord characteristics. Women typically have shorter, thinner vocal cords, affecting their voice tone compared to men.

Lakoff (1975) argued that gender differences in language are primarily social rather than inherent. She suggested that these differences arise from distinct social roles assigned to men and women, shaped through socialisation rather than biological factors. Lakoff's view aligns with feminist perspectives, which argue that societal expectations and norms shape women's language behaviours, leading to expressions of uncertainty and diminished authority due to their lower social status.

Tannen (1990) emphasised the role of socialisation in developing gender-specific communication styles. She demonstrated how deeply embedded societal expectations mould linguistic norms and behaviours, reinforcing gender roles through language.

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2013) observed that traditional social structures grant higher social status to men, resulting in speech privileges. This patriarchal structure marginalises women, who may adopt more sophisticated language to counteract their subordinate status. Additionally, physiological differences contribute to language variation between genders.

The impact of gendered language, as discussed by Spender (1985), reveals the pervasive influence of linguistic norms on social dynamics. Spender's assertion that language is patriarchal underscores the power structures embedded within language, which can perpetuate male dominance and reinforce gender inequalities. This perspective suggests that linguistic expressions, shaped by societal norms, may contribute to the marginalisation of women and the perpetuation of male control.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore gendered language use in Bukusu customary

marriage ceremonies. Conducted in the Kimilili sub-county, Bungoma County, the research employed purposive sampling to select 40 participants (24 men, 16 women) who had participated in or conducted Bukusu marriage ceremonies. Purposive sampling is widely used for the identification and selection of information-rich cases and the most effective use of limited resources (Patton, 2002). Individuals who are knowledgeable and/or experienced with the phenomenon of interest are involved (Cresswell & Clark, 2011). Data was collected from four key stages: Siselelo (introduction), Eng'anana (bride price negotiation and engagement), and the final wedding ceremony.

Data collection methods included observations, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The focus groups comprised 8 individuals from different regions representing both the bride's and groom's families, ensuring a diverse perspective. Field notes were taken during 3 introduction ceremonies, 2 engagement ceremonies, 2 bride price negotiations and 3 final weddings across various locations.

Discourse analysis (DA) was employed to analyse transcribed interviews, focus group discussions and observations. DA focused on linguistic features, discourse structures and non-verbal communication within the socio-cultural context of the ceremonies. This method allowed for a detailed study of how language reflects and perpetuates cultural norms, power dynamics and gender roles specific to the Bukusu community. Additionally, DA helped uncover underlying patterns of communication that might not be immediately apparent, offering a deeper understanding of the interplay between language and social behaviour in these traditional ceremonies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Gender differences in language use during customary marriage ceremonies among the Bukusu of Kimilili sub-county are shaped by a variety of factors. These differences are not random but are

deeply connected in a complex interplay of traditions, social expectations and historical practices. The factors that contribute to gendered language differences include the Bukusu societal expectations and cultural heritage, traditional gender roles, socialisation and upbringing, gendered power dynamics and gender identities.

The Bukusu Societal Expectations and Cultural Heritage

The Bukusu societal expectations and cultural heritage shape gendered patterns of language use during marriage ceremonies. Culturally, women are expected to be more polite, use more emotional language, or engage in more gossip, while men are expected to be more direct, assertive and competitive in their speech. This is reflected in the words and actions of both genders during the customary marriage ceremonies.

The bride's aunt, during the introduction stage in marriage ceremony 4, said the following in Excerpt 1 below:

Excerpt 1

Nachukuwa kwanza fursa hii kumshukuru Mungu kwa hii siku. Amekuwa mwema kwetu. Tumeona uongozi wake. Namshuuru Mungu kwa mtoto wangu mwenye amejibeba vizuri mpaka najivunia kama mama. Wacha Mungu awe nasi kuanzia mwanzo hadi mwisho. Wageni wetu wote mnakaribishwa na mjisikie mko nyumbani.

Translation: *(I want first to take this opportunity to thank God for this day. He has been so good to us. We have seen his guidance. I want to thank God for my daughter who has carried out herself so well that I as a mother am proud. May God see us through from this initial step to the last. All our visitors are welcome and may you feel at home. God bless you.)*

Her statement in Excerpt 1 above was said with an inexpressive face at the thought of her beloved

daughter leaving her to be enjoined to another family. There were feelings of **anxiety** and **fear** of the unknown. She was preparing to give her daughter to the family she was not even sure would take good care of her. Women often play a nurturing and supportive role, emphasising the spiritual and emotional aspects of the event. Their communication style tends to be more inclusive and relational, making it more common for them to express gratitude and invoke blessings, as illustrated in Excerpt 2 below. A female relative during the introduction stage in marriage ceremony 4 said:

Excerpt 2

Tuna furaha, tunamshukuru Mungu kwa kuwa na msichana wetu tangu awe msichana hadi sasa. Nafurahi Mungu amemsaidia kwa masomo yake tangia nursery hadi college. Mtoto wangu tumekulea kanisani, hata ukitoka hapa endelea na huduma kanisani. Asante kwa kutuletea mwenzako hadharani. Naomba ndoa yako ifaulu na ubarikiwe na watoto wengi.

Translation: *(We are happy; we thank God for being with our girl from childhood to adulthood. I am happy that God was so good to take her through her education from nursery to college. My child, we have brought you up in the way of the church, even as you leave here continue with the church service. Thank you for bringing to us a partner openly. May your marriage succeed and may you be blessed with many children.)*

Women's religious language, as revealed in Excerpt 2 above, is embedded in their role of providing spiritual guidance and moral education to their children. Only a religious woman is believed to be better equipped to instil values and principles in her children, ensuring they grow up with a strong moral foundation.

Men who had formal duties were dressed in presentable outfits. They are culturally expected to look serious. A badly dressed man is unfit to ask for a girl's hand in marriage. Improper dressing brings

embarrassment. Good dressing is also a symbol of assertiveness and bravery, according to an interview with an elder.

The bride's spokesperson in the first introduction ceremony authoritatively and confidently addressed the gathering as follows in Excerpt 3 below:

Excerpt 3

Aaa, nashukuru kuka kwa kunitunuku, aaa hio heshima yenye natambuliza. Ninakaribisha wenzangu, karibu mjiskie, kila mara huwa tunaskia ati mjiskie nyumbani, lakini sasa kwa hii nyumba jiskie tu kama uko ugenini. (Creates a light moment and people laugh). Katika ukoo huu wananiita 'kuka.' Katika hali ya kujuana mimi naitwa Isaac Wamalwa na ukoo hu ni katika Ukianani.

Translation: *(Aaa, I thank you, grandfather, for honouring me with this opportunity to introduce. Aaa, the honour that I acknowledge. I welcome my friends, welcome and feel, usually, we say feel at home, but here, just feel as if you are a guest. (Creates a light moment, and people laugh). In this clan, they call me 'grandfather.' In the spirit of getting to know each other, my name is Isaac Wamalwa and this clan is from Ukianani.)*

The bride's spokesperson in Excerpt 3 above authoritatively and confidently addressed the gathering, using a combination of formal, respectful and humorous language to establish **rapport** and set a **welcoming tone**. The speech begins with gratitude towards the elders, showing respect and acknowledgement of the honour given. A warm welcome is extended to the guests with a comical twist, creating a light-hearted moment that fosters a friendly and relaxed atmosphere. The speaker's self-introduction and explanation of the title 'kuka' (grandfather) highlight the importance of kinship and respect within the community. This balance of formality and humour, combined with the speaker's authoritative tone, reflects traditional gender roles where men are expected to lead the public discourse

and demonstrate social leadership, reinforcing societal expectations of male authority and confidence in ceremonial contexts.

Later on, the groom's spokesperson responds appropriately as follows in Excerpt 4 below:

Excerpt 4

Ila naomba mniruhusu niongee lugha ambayo tunaelewa wote. Kwa sababu nikiongea lugha ingine I will change the grammatical meaning. What I want to say is asandi...khwama ekamusinga, mala khuli nende lukoba lwa kuka Emmanuel Murunga. Basasi Bakhurumire mungo mno khubela khwenya bulebe.

Translation: (*I request you allow me speak in a language we all understand. If I speak in another language I will change the grammatical meaning. What I want to say is thank you... we are from Kamusinga and we come from the lineage of grandfather Emmanuel Murunga. Parents asked us to come because we need a relationship.*)

The groom's spokesperson in Excerpt 4 above navigates gender societal expectations, cultural authenticity and the significance of the marriage negotiation through strategic language use. By initially requesting permission to speak in a commonly understood language, he meets societal expectations for clear and respectful communication, a role often assigned to men in formal negotiations. However, his shift to Lubukusu for key points preserves cultural **authenticity** and emphasises the serious nature of the discussion. This code-switching highlights the importance of maintaining cultural heritage and respect for traditions while ensuring mutual understanding, demonstrating the balance between modern communication needs and the weight of cultural practices.

The bride's grandfather in marriage ceremony 1, during the introduction stage, proudly said the following in Excerpt 5 below:

Excerpt 5

Asante, naitwa Simon Kubende kutoka ukoo ya Bakhurarwa. Nawasalimu tena na karibu nyumbani. Tunamatumaini ya kuunda ukoo na nyinyi. Tumeskia nyinyi ni watu wazuri na ndio maana mmetuona hapa. Penye tunaishi wengi wananiita Mango.

Translation: (*They call me Simon Kubende, from Bakhurarwa clan, and welcome home. We are really looking forward to curve a relationship with you. We have heard you are good people and that is why you see us here...where I live people call me Mango.*)

Some Bukusu men find their ego massaged when they associate with the tribe's kingpins, as illustrated in Excerpt 5 above. Mango is a legendary figure in Bukusu culture, often celebrated in stories that highlight masculine histories related to male circumcision. The Bukusu concept of male identity associated with circumcision and emphasising military valour can be traced back to the legend of Mango, the circumcision hero. Mango's acceptance of circumcision after slaying a dreaded python is believed to be the first act that connected circumcision with bravery, valour and warfare. Mango's feat was seen as a battle victory, leading the Bukusu to regard circumcision as a measure of masculine bravery and warriorhood (Wasike, 2013).

The linguistic behaviours observed in Bukusu marriage ceremonies are deeply influenced by the cultural rituals, customs and ceremonial protocols, particularly those surrounding male circumcision. This ritual, marked by physical and psychological endurance, serves as a formative experience that shapes the linguistic style of Bukusu men. The language learned during circumcision, characterised by harshness, vulgarity and assertiveness, becomes an integral part of male identity and communication patterns.

During the circumcision process, initiates are exposed to aggressive language and derogatory songs that reinforce traditional gender roles. Phrases

like 'you are a man, not a woman, make your house stand' encapsulate the cultural expectation for men to embody strength and dominance, both physically and linguistically. This linguistic conditioning is internalised and later manifests in the way men communicate, particularly in ceremonial contexts where they are expected to assert their masculinity.

The use of vulgar language and derogatory remarks during circumcision ceremonies establishes a linguistic divide between men and women. The harsh, often abusive language used in circumcision songs fosters a culture where men are encouraged to demean women, which carries over into other social interactions, including marriage ceremonies. This dynamic creates a linguistic hierarchy where men's speech is dominant and women's contributions are marginalised.

The linguistic dynamics in Bukusu culture are deeply intertwined with the societal roles and statuses that are exclusively accessible to men, such as the roles of 'bakimbi' (rainmakers), 'bang'os'i (prophets or diviners), and 'baseni be kimise' (funeral orators). These revered positions require not only specific attributes like circumcision, maturity, and social status but also come with distinct linguistic privileges and practices that reinforce gender hierarchies within the community. These attributes are unattainable for women, relegating them to a position where they can only remain a shadow of these esteemed roles, as confirmed by an elder in an interview.

Men who hold these roles are granted linguistic authority, enabling them to use language in ways that assert power, control and influence. This language is not only a means of communication but also a tool for social control, allowing men in these positions to command respect and maintain their status within the community. The exclusivity of these roles to men reinforces the idea that certain forms of speech are inherently male, thereby marginalising women from accessing or using these powerful linguistic forms.

The restriction of certain revered roles to men in Bukusu culture has profound linguistic implications. It creates a gendered division in language use, where men are endowed with the authority to use specific, powerful forms of speech, while women are relegated to more passive or supportive roles. This division reinforces broader cultural norms that maintain male dominance, both in societal roles and in the linguistic practices that accompany them.

Traditional Gender Roles

Traditional roles and responsibilities assigned to men and women within Bukusu influence the linguistic behaviours of males and females. Traditionally, men were engaged in more outdoor and public leadership duties, such as presiding over public forums and fighting in wars, while women were confined to the domestic sphere in sustenance occupations like farming, collecting firewood, fetching water and raising children. This distinction between male and female roles had a huge influence on gender relations and social interactions, so much so that women often worked hard as caregivers but earned less respect in the public sphere, which was considered a male domain (Barasa, 1996). Males' and females' linguistic behaviour was a reflection of traditional gender roles designed for them by their forefathers. Boys are often tasked with more physically demanding outdoor chores, such as mending fences, mowing the lawn and making bricks. These activities are seen as opportunities for boys to develop physical strength, bravery, resilience and future economic independence. As a result, boys grow up accustomed to hard work and are often socialised to be tough and self-reliant. This upbringing can translate into the use of harsher, more direct language as they grow older, reflecting the robustness expected of them.

Conversely, girls typically receive chores that are less physically demanding and more nurturing in nature, such as caring for younger siblings, cooking and cleaning. Girls are often treated with more tenderness and protection, reinforcing the societal expectation that they should be gentle and caring.

They are typically granted less freedom to explore their surroundings compared to boys and are often closely supervised. This differential treatment underscores the value placed on their safety and decorum. These gender-specific roles and expectations illustrate how deeply ingrained traditional gender norms influence the development of boys and girls. They shape not only their abilities and preferences but also their language, behaviour and perceptions of themselves and others.

Males' leadership role saw them use authoritative language and a commanding tone while females offered emotional support. The groom's uncle during the pre-wedding stage in marriage ceremony 3 and the bride's aunt and the groom's female relative in marriage ceremony 4 during the engagement stage said the following in Excerpts 6, 7 and 8 below, respectively:

Excerpt 6

Kijana yangu chungu familia yako vizuri. Kama mwanamme unafaa kusimama kwa ajili ya familia yako siku zote.

Translation: (*My son, take care of your family well. As a man you should stand up for your family always.*)

Excerpt 7

Enju selii raisi taa, oche wikhilikhe mwana wange.

Translation: (*Marriage is not easy, go and persevere my child.*)

Excerpt 8

Ukipatwa na changa moto usikimilie kwa mama yako. Tuko hapa kusimama na wewe na kwasababu kuanzia leo sisi ni familia yako.

Translation: (*When faced with challenges don't run to your mother. We are here to support you because from today we shall be your family.*)

In Excerpts 6, 7 and 8 above, the language used by both male and female speakers illustrates their traditional roles within Bukusu society. The groom's uncle, in Excerpt 6, employs a **commanding** and **authoritative tone**, underscoring the traditional male role to be responsible and steadfast in their familial duties. This direct language reflects the emphasis on male leadership and the expectation for men to be the pillars of their families. In contrast, the bride's aunt and the groom's relative, in Excerpts 7 and 8, use supportive and encouraging language, focusing on emotional and practical advice. Their speech, characterised by empathy and reassurance, aligns with the traditional female role of providing **emotional support** and **nurturing**. The juxtaposition of these linguistic styles highlights the distinct yet complementary roles of men and women in the context of Bukusu marriage ceremonies.

A female relative in the pre-wedding stage of the third marriage ceremony advised the bride as follows in Excerpt 9 below:

Excerpt 9

Maintain cleanliness, maintain yourself my child, okhachilekhula taa, maintain the beauty that he first saw. Women are like flowers.

Translation: (*Maintain cleanliness, maintain yourself my child, do not neglect yourself and look unattractive, maintain the beauty that he first saw. Women are like flowers.*)

The metaphor of a woman being a flower, as explained in Excerpt 9 above in the context of a Bukusu marriage ceremony, carries both positive and negative connotations. Positively, it symbolises her beauty, purity and essential role within the union, highlighting her value and the respect she commands in the marital relationship. The flower metaphor underscores her importance as a source of life, growth and harmony, reflecting a cultural appreciation of her contributions to family and community. However, the comparison can also have negative implications, as it may reduce her to a mere

ornamental or passive role, overlooking her support, strength and individuality.

Socialisation and Upbringing

Socialisation processes and early childhood experiences contribute to gender differences in language use. From a young age, boys and girls are often socialised differently, which shape their language use. Boys and girls are exposed to different language models, speech registers and communicative norms during their upbringing and these experiences shape their linguistic repertoires. Boys are encouraged to be assertive and use language that reflects dominance or independence, while girls are encouraged to be nurturing and use language that is more cooperative and empathetic.

Wood and Fixmer-Oraiz (2019) states that to be feminine means to be physically attractive, emotionally expressive, nurturing, interested in aesthetics, and concerned with people and relationships. Gender is learned from infancy; we are encouraged to embody the gender that society prescribes for us. Young girls are often cautioned, 'Don't be selfish-share with others' and 'don't be bossy.' They are praised for looking pretty, taking care of others (including dolls), and being nice. Young boys, in contrast, are more likely to be admonished, 'Don't be a sissy' and 'Don't cry'. They are rewarded for strength, independence and success, particularly in competitive arenas. These early socialisations profoundly shape linguistic styles that later manifest in adulthood, including during ceremonial contexts. The nurturing and cooperative language encouraged in girls often translates into less assertive speech patterns in women, as seen in the Bukusu marriage ceremonies, where women are often interrupted or sidelined in discussions. Conversely, the assertiveness and emotional restraint instilled in boys lead to more dominant and forceful language use in men, who frequently dominate conversations and enforce traditional gender roles during these ceremonies. Thus, the gendered language use observed in these cultural events is deeply rooted in the childhood

experiences and societal expectations that shape individuals from a young age.

The bride was advised the following by the friend of the groom's mother during the engagement stage in the fourth marriage ceremony as follows in Excerpt 10 below:

Excerpt 10

Tafadhali kuja kwa familia yetu na uishi vile tunaishi. Sisi tunapenda ukristo na tunaenda kanisani. Tunatarajia pia umchunge mmeo, mpelekee maji kwa bafu, ongea na yeye vizuri usimpigie kelekele, mheshimu na utahisi mapenzi yake inakushukia.

Translation: *(Please come to our home and continue the same legacy you will find. We are highly religious people and we go to church. Also, we expect you to take care of your husband, take water to the bath room for him, talk to him nicely without shouting, respect him and you will feel his love descending on you.)*

In Excerpt 10 above, the phrase 'talk to him nicely without shouting' in the advice given to the bride highlights several key aspects of gendered communication norms and gender socialisation. The directive emphasises the importance of maintaining politeness and respect in communication, particularly within the context of marriage. This suggests an expectation for women, as part of gender socialisation, to manage their emotional expressions in a manner that aligns with societal ideals of decorum and respectfulness.

An aunt of the bride in marriage ceremony 1 during the pre-wedding stage advised the following in Excerpt 11 below:

Excerpt 11

Mwambie mzee wako hivi vitu tatu: 'nakupenda', 'asante' na 'pole' na ndoa yako itakuwa ya amani na furaha.

Translation: (*Tell your husband these three things: 'I love you', 'thank you' and 'sorry', and your marriage will be peaceful and joyful.*)

The advice in Excerpt 11 above suggests the socially ingrained language norms for women, emphasising the importance of expressing love, gratitude and apology. By advising the bride to frequently use these phrases, it reinforces the societal expectation for women to prioritise maintaining harmony and emotional intimacy in the marriage. This reflects gender socialisation, where women are often taught to be nurturing, supportive, and emotionally expressive, fostering a peaceful and joyful marital relationship through their communication style.

The language and behaviour boys and girls are exposed to from a young age play a significant role in shaping their communication styles and interpersonal interactions as adults. Boys, given more freedom and faced with challenging tasks, may adopt a more assertive and sometimes abrasive way of speaking. In contrast, girls who receive more nurturing and protective treatment often develop a communication style that is more empathetic and considerate. Toys commonly bought for girls, such as dolls, kitchen sets and dress-up clothes, often encourage nurturing, role-playing and domestic skills, leading to language that is rich in social and emotional vocabulary, emphasising relationships and caregiving. Conversely, toys bought for boys, like action figures, building sets and toy vehicles, promote problem-solving, spatial awareness and action-oriented play, fostering language that is more directive, descriptive and technical. These early play experiences shape communication styles, with girls often developing stronger conversational skills and empathy, while boys excel in instructional and analytical language, reflecting the different social and cognitive roles encouraged by their childhood toys (Wood & Fixmer-Oraiz, 2019).

Gendered Power Dynamics

Gendered power dynamics influence language use during Bukusu marriage ceremonies. Men held more

authority and decision-making power within ceremonial contexts. This power asymmetry affected communication patterns. This power was reflected in males' linguistic behaviour. Fairclough (2013) states that language has become the primary medium of social control and power. The discursive exertion of power is expressed through grammatical forms and also by a person's control of political, educational, judicial, religious and social occasions.

Men possessed authority and leadership during the Bukusu customary marriage ceremonies. In many families, there is a hierarchical structure where males often hold positions of authority and leadership. During marriage ceremonies, male family members, particularly elders or patriarchs, used language that reflected their authoritative role. The groom's and the bride's uncles remarked as follows in Excerpts 12 and 13 below during the engagement party in marriage ceremony 4 respectively:

Excerpt 12

As the head of this family, I bless this union and pray for prosperity and happiness. Remember, a successful marriage is built on mutual respect and understanding. My son, lead your family with wisdom and integrity, just as we your elders have done.

The speaker in Excerpt 12 above asserts his position of authority and leadership as the head of the family, setting a precedent for the groom to follow. The speaker also provides a blessing and advice, reinforcing the expectation that men are the primary providers of wisdom and guidance in the family.

Excerpt 13

Msichana yangu, unapoungana na familia ya mume wako, fahamu jukumu lako katika ndoa. Chunga na kulea familia yako kwa upendo na bidii. Na wewe, kijana yangu, uwe mlinzi na uilisha familia, kuhakikisha amani na maelewano nyumbani kwako.

Translation: (*My daughter, as you join your*

husband's family, know what your role in marriage is. Support and nurture your household with love and diligence. And you, my son, be the protector and provider, ensuring peace and harmony in your home.

The language used in Excerpt 13 above differentiates the roles of men and women in marriage. The bride is advised to support and nurture the household, which reflects traditional female roles of caregiving and emotional support. The groom, on the other hand, is instructed to be the protector and provider, ensuring peace and harmony in the home. This aligns with traditional male roles of safeguarding and provisioning for the family.

The excerpts provided (12 and 13 above) reflect the gendered power dynamics inherent in the Bukusu customary marriage ceremonies, where men predominantly hold positions of authority and leadership. The speeches collectively underscore a patriarchal framework where men are positioned as the heads of the family, tasked with leadership and decision-making responsibilities. This reinforces male dominance and the expectation that men will maintain the family's integrity and uphold cultural values, as also echoed by Kinuthia et al. (2015). The advice given reflects deeply ingrained socialisation practices that teach men and women their expected roles from an early age. Men are socialised to be authoritative and lead, while women are socialised to be supportive and nurturing.

In contrast to the authoritative and commanding speech patterns observed in men, women's communication was characterised by politeness, submissiveness and a nurturing tone. The following were the words of a neighbour to the family of the bride in the pre-wedding stage of the second marriage ceremony. She was addressing a guest who arrived late as follows in Excerpt 15 below:

Excerpt 14

Yaya, aki nasima koo, karipu yaya, khuekho sina?, mmh...nono olia sina bhaye?

Translation: (*My dear, thank you, you are most welcome, what can I give you? Mmh...now what will you eat?*)

The style of speech in Excerpt 14 above explains the emphasis on hospitality, warmth and attentiveness to others' needs, reinforcing traditional gender roles and expectations within the cultural context. This reinforces the gendered expectation that women should be caregivers and supporters rather than leaders.

Gender Identity

According to Tannen (1990), individuals internalise societal expectations about gender and adjust their language use accordingly to align with their perceived gender identity. In the context of a Bukusu marriage ceremony, men and women felt compelled to conform to gender-specific linguistic norms to be perceived as adhering to traditional roles or to avoid backlash for deviating from these expectations. Men used assertive and direct language to assert their authority and leadership, while women employed more deferential and inclusive speech to emphasise their supportive and nurturing roles. This linguistic conformity not only signals their membership and affiliation within the community but also reinforces the cultural values and social structures that underpin the marriage ceremony. A male participant in focus group two said as follows in Excerpt 15 below:

Excerpt 15

Sometimes we are compelled to behave as per the society's expectation.

Excerpt 15 above reveals the powerful influence of societal norms on individual behaviour, particularly regarding gender identity. The use of 'compelled' underscores the external pressure to conform to traditional expectations, highlighting a lack of personal decisions. This acknowledgement of societal influence reflects the process of socialisation, where individuals internalise and act according to communal standards. The statement also indicates an awareness of these societal

constructs, suggesting a potential for questioning and challenging rigid gender roles.

In Excerpt 11 above ‘Mwambie mzee wako hivi vitu tatu: ‘nakupenda’, ‘asante’ na ‘pole’ na ndoa yako itakuwa ya amani na furaha, (Tell your husband these three things: I love you, thank you and sorry and your marriage will be peaceful and joyful)’, the aunt’s advice is deeply embedded in gender identity norms, reflecting the socialised expectation for women to maintain emotional and relational harmony. The emphasis on expressing love, gratitude, and apology illustrates the nurturing role women are expected to play, which aligns with traditional views of femininity.

In Bukusu society, adherence to gendered language norms significantly impacts individuals' sense of identity and their roles during ceremonies. Men often dominate discussions with assertive language, leading to the exclusion of women and reinforcing traditional gender roles. This dynamic can marginalise those who do not conform to these linguistic norms, causing them to feel alienated or hesitant to participate. Women who challenge these norms may face social disapproval, while men who do not meet societal expectations of assertiveness may feel their contributions are undervalued. The pressure to conform restricts authentic self-expression, affecting the quality of communication and reinforcing gender stereotypes. These practices perpetuate the exclusion of certain individuals from significant ceremonial roles, limiting their participation in emotionally or spiritually meaningful aspects of the event, thereby shaping both their identity and social roles within the community.

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CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The study of gender differences in language use during Bukusu marriage ceremonies in the Kimilili sub-county reveals that these differences are deeply rooted in cultural norms, societal expectations and traditional gender roles. Through detailed observations, interviews and focus group discussions, it was found that men and women exhibit distinct linguistic behaviours influenced by their prescribed roles within the community. Men often used authoritative and assertive language, reflecting their roles as leaders and decision-makers, while women tended to use nurturing, supportive and emotionally expressive language, aligning with their roles as caregivers and moral guides. These linguistic patterns are reinforced through socialisation processes from a young age and are perpetuated by the community's strong adherence to cultural heritage and traditions. By understanding these factors, the study contributes to broader discussions on gender and language, providing insights that could help challenge and potentially reshape traditional gender norms and stereotypes within the Bukusu community and beyond.

Recommendations: To promote gender-equitable language use in Bukusu customary marriage ceremonies, local cultural organisations and gender equality advocates should encourage inclusive language training for community leaders. Organising workshops and training sessions will equip elders, leaders and participants in marriage ceremonies with the knowledge and skills to use inclusive language that respects and empowers both genders. This initiative aims to reshape traditional communication patterns to reflect modern values of gender equality.

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