Comparative analyses of linguistic sexism in Afan Oromo, Amharic, and Gamo

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This study tried to examine how linguistic sexism manifests through the lexicons of Afan Oromo, Amharic and Gamo in the light of the social and cultural lives of the speakers. The data for this study were collected from native speakers through elicitation. These data were analyzed based on Critical Discourse Analysis approach. As the study showed, among the three languages, semantically asymmetric terms, metaphors of terms that denote human beings, use of man/he as generic, and administration titles exhibit sexism. This has resulted from the male dominance in the socio-cultural lives of the societies. The linguistic sexism observed in this study are now conventions of the languages. Researches show that language conventions shape the way speakers think. Hence, it is believed that these sorts of linguistic sexism among the languages maintain the socio-culturally created gender bias ideologies of the societies. This scenario would be a challenge for the current gender mainstreaming endeavors of Ethiopia. Therefore, a thorough study should be carried out on these languages and the rest of the country’s languages to assist in combating the broader gender inequality scenario in Ethiopia.

Key words: Linguistic sexism, Afan Oromo, Amharic, Gamo, Male dominance.

INTRODUCTION

Ethiopian people are categorized under two ethno-linguistic families called Afro-asiatic and Nilo-saharan. These families comprise of over 70 different ethno-lingual communities with over 200 dialects (Central Statistics Agency, 2007). All of the groups have lived together in centuries of diversities and unity described as innumerable social, linguistic, and cultural differences. There were important points of contacts among the groups that resulted in a vast amount of assimilation of populations, very considerable adoptions of languages, innumerable conversions from one faith to another and extensive intermarriages (Lubo, 2012 citing Twibel 1998). Assimilations of populations and adoptions of languages in Ethiopia have begun with the Cushitic and the Semitic in the central highlands of Ethiopia between the 12 and 13th centuries. It was accelerated during the Oromo expansions in the 16th century and assimilation policies of the Ethiopian Emperors between the 16 and the 19th centuries (Lubo, 2012 citing Galperin, 1981). Due to the political, cultural, linguistic, and religious interactions among its ethnic groups, Ethiopia is said to have developed in to a linguistic area (cf, Tosco, 2000).
Consequently, languages of the Ethiopian linguistic area share as many as 13 linguistic traits (Thomason, 2001; Tosco, 2000). Among these, gender distinction in second and third person pronouns and the use of the form equivalent to the feminine singular for plural concord are the two features concerned with grammatical gender. However, the sociocultural meanings of these features were not explained in these studies.

Among the languages of Ethiopian linguistic area, this study has focused on the languages of the Oromo, the Amhara, and the Gamo. These societies are patriarchal and patrilineal. Culturally, among these societies, male and female children have unequal places. Male children used to be trained for leadership while female children were trained to serve the males. Male children received particular care and respect from childhood onwards. From the very beginning they were trained for their later function as patriarch of the family and administrator of its property. In the absence of their fathers, the first born sons served as the patriarch of their families. They had the privilege of representing their fathers in public meetings and affairs. In contrast, daughters participated in all domestic and extra domestic tasks. They aided in rearing their younger brothers and sisters. They served food and washed the feet of their younger brothers and sisters. The cultural gender bias among the societies can be taken as the possible source of gender ideologies which inevitably reflect through their languages as linguistic sexism.

Though there are epistemological gaps with reference to Ethiopian languages, studies show that: sexist language marginalizes women, makes them invisible and creates the impression of a male dominated society. It also demeans women to marriage material, and reinforces stereotypical gender roles. Furthermore, it limits women’s opportunities and even their aspirations. What is more, it causes women to view themselves in a negative way (Mills, 1995:95). Therefore, linguistic sexism psychologically affects women.

Furthermore, research findings have established the direct correlation between the gender correctness of the official language and the economic possibilities of women in society. International advocacy organizations have also found evidence of the relationship between language practices in recruitment policies and women’s competitiveness in the labour market in post-communist countries. For example, the Human Rights Watch report on Ukraine (August 27, 2003) contains information on gender discrimination in the language of job advertising and interviews, which results in excluding women from the workforce (Tolstokorova, 2005).

Therefore, to tackle the problems, anti-sexist language campaigns were launched and were carried out in most industrial countries such as the USA, Canada, the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, Austria, France, Italy, Spain, Belgium, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Scandinavian countries. Similar campaigns have also been underway in transnational organizations such as the United Nations, the UNESCO, the Council of Europe, the European Parliament, etc. The main objective of these campaigns are to counteract linguistic gender discrimination as a component of the global problem of gender inequality (ibid).

Nevertheless, in Ethiopian academic arena, any effort to combat gender-exclusive language is not yet considered by scholars. So, it is not represented by a theoretically grounded scientific approach. Therefore, as input for the local or global gender mainstreaming movements and as a kind of ‘starter’ for other profound research activities in this field, this study has investigated linguistic sexism in the lexicons of Afan Oromo, Amharic, and Gamo.

Specifically, the study has investigated how semantically asymmetric lexical items, semantic connotations of terms that denote male and female human beings, use of the terms ‘man/he’ as generic, and administration titles, manifest linguistic sexism in Afan Oromo, Amharic, and Gamo. And it explained the social and cultural sources of the problem.

Directly or indirectly, this study is believed to benefit various national and international gender policymaking bodies, human right organizations, and researchers. Thus, it could help the Ethiopian Ministry of Women’s Affairs, Human Rights Watch, and UN Women Watch in their fight against gender inequality as it pinpointed the sources and nature of linguistic gender bias in Afan Oromo, Amharic, and Gamo. And it explained the social and cultural sources of the problem.

Though globally the study of linguistic gender bias has been underway for more than three decades, in Ethiopia, it has barely been started. Consequently, in the context of Ethiopian languages, there are only three works that are related to this study. These are: Amanuel Raga (2007) or Amanuel Raga and Hirut Woldemariam (2011) on Afan Oromo, Roza Tadesse (2009) on Tigrigna, and Zelealem Leyew (2010) on Amharic. Except that of Zelealem Leyew’s, the other two works are MA theses.

Amanuel Raga’s (2007) MA thesis is entitled, ‘Gender bias ideology as manifested in the grammatical structure of Afan Oromo’. In the context of Ethiopian languages, this work is a ground breaking work. As this work reveals, in Afan Oromo, the gender assignment systems of nouns follow the social gender bias ideologies of the speakers. Nouns which denote objects that are small in size, powerless, and associated with negative social values are categorized as feminine in gender, while those which are large in size, relatively powerful and have positive social values are categorized as masculine in gender.

Furthermore, in Afan Oromo, masculine nouns are used as the generic form of most of the nouns and using the feminine forms of these nouns make their meanings deviate from the meanings of the generic ones that is, the
masculine forms. What is more, the semantic contents of verbs that are related to marriage and the relationship of wife and husband designate the superiority of male in the societies that speak the languages.

Moreover, this study shows that figurative use of feminine nouns that denote female human connote cowardice, shyness, weakness and the like; while masculine nouns that denote male human connote concepts like bravery, strength, boldness and the like. In addition, personal names also reflect the cultural gender bias ideology in the speech communities through their semantic/pragmatic connotations. Finally yet importantly, as Amanuel's work unravels, some professional and administrative titles do not have feminine forms, though currently women can hold the positions they denote. This work was published under the same title in 2011 in collaboration with Hirut Woldemariam.

Roza Tadesse's (2009) MA thesis which is entitled, 'Gender bias ideology of Tigigna speakers', is very similar with that Amanuel (2007). Their similarities are in terms of language features examined and findings. So, according to Roza's work, Tigigna, reveals the same gender bias reported by Amanuel's work on Afan Oromo.

Zealeam Leyew's (2010) work on Amharic is entitled, 'Asymmetrical representation of gender in Amharic'. This work deals with the linguistic and pragmatic representation of gender in Amharic. As this work shows, gender representation in Amharic is asymmetrical and it is heavily influenced by pragmatics. In Amharic, masculine is the default gender with more prominence than feminine. The linguistic coding of gender carries socially significant meanings reflecting a male-biased grammar. Specifically, the personal and demonstrative pronouns, generic and proper nouns, nominals and other word classes are inherently masculine. Moreover, masculine gender operates not only for animate nouns but also for inanimate ones. What is more, in Amharic, any noun with animate feature is encoded as male in the verb. Whereas, masculine expresses augmentation while feminine expresses diminution in Amharic.

On the other hand, some distantly related works such as, Sena (2008) Tufero, (2005), and Jeylan (2005) discuss that Afan Oromo proverbs reveal the subordinate sociopolitical and cultural places given to women among the language community. Besides, Wondwosen (2000) shows the same gender bias among the Oromo society through his study on the practice of laguu. According to Wondwosen, laguu is a culturally established linguistic taboo that restricts married women's linguistic right by prohibiting them from calling their husbands’ and their in-laws’ names in the name of ‘respect’. As Wondwosen argues, this practice limits the linguistic right of married Oromo women.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The main purpose of the study was to analyze the linguistic sexism reflected in lexicons of Afan Oromo, Amharic, and Gamo. Thus, it was based on primary data collected through elicitation. The criteria for the selection of the three languages were numerousness of their speakers and the linguistic and cultural contact among their speakers and other language speakers of Ethiopia. According to CSA 2007 report, the sum of Afan Oromo and Amharic speakers was about 60% of the total population of the country. In addition, as already discussed in the background of this paper, in Ethiopia linguistic and cultural assimilations were caused mainly by speakers of these languages. Therefore, each of them was selected as an example of its respective family (Cushitic and Semitic). On the other hand, Gamo was selected from the Omotic family because of its higher similarities with most of the languages of the family and claimed linguistic and cultural relations in its geographical setting (Wondimu, 2010; Hirut, 2013).

The data for this study were collected from native speakers of the selected languages who live in Jimma and Arba Minch. Accordingly, six elderly informants were selected from each of the three language communities by giving equal chances to both men and women. Then, the 18 informants were elicited on the linguistic data required for this study. In this process, audio recordings and note taking were employed. What is more, the data on cultural gender ideologies among the speakers of the languages were collected from ten elderly cultural elites of the respective language group through interview.

The data were analyzed qualitatively in the contexts of the cultural gender ideologies of the speakers of the three languages. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was used as the theoretical approach of this study. CDA focuses on real instances of social interaction and its theoretical framework has distinctive power to view the relationship between language and society, language and gender, language and other social variables. The critical approach sees language use as a form of social practice (Fairclough, 1995) and it interprets social practice from linguistic perspective by intervening on the side of dominated and disadvantaged groups.

A study in light of CDA focuses on the exploration on a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event with the macro-social structure and micro-conversational settings. CDA holds the notion that language use is socially constitutive as well as socially shaped. It constitutes situations, objects of knowledge and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997: 258). According to this idea, the constitutive aspect helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo and it contributes to transforming it as well.

Language use can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations between social classes, ethnic groups and gender categories. For example, power asymmetry will be realized through an unequal representation and positioning of women and men in different status. Considering this particular inherent function, language in use may be ideology-laden and may be sexist passing off conventional beliefs and prejudice. Sexism in language usually lies beneath the surface. To unfold such underlying qualities, CDA provides a critical perspective to make the covert aspects visible to people.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Under this part, the result of the study would be presented and discussed based on the linguistic and socio-cultural data collected from native speakers of Afan Oromo, Amharic, and Gamo. In this process, the paper has tried to present how semantically asymmetric lexical items, semantic connotations of terms that denote male and female human beings, use of the masculine form as generic, and administration titles, reflect linguistic sexism.
in Afan Oromo, Amharic, and Gamo. Based on the specific objectives of this study, issues like ideological implications of the linguistic sexism in the languages and their similarities and differences have been compared and contrasted with the universally known gender biased linguistic features along the four sections which are geared towards presenting specific linguistic features. Unless specified, the linguistic data presented in each of the sections are from Afan Oromo, Amharic, and Gamo correspondingly.

Semantically Asymmetric Lexical Items

This section presents how linguistic sexism manifests in Afan Oromo, Amharic, and Gamo through semantically asymmetric lexical items. In this regard, the linguistic practices among the three languages differ from each other. However, the socio-cultural sexism to be discussed in this regard are the same. Incidentally, the mandatory and exclusive grammatical collocation of some verbs that express socio-cultural practices with nouns referring to woman or man are somewhat similar in Afan Oromo and Amharic.

In Afan Oromo and Amharic, the grammatical obligation of some verbs to collocate only with nouns that refer to man or woman referent has resulted from the socio-cultural practices that the verbs express. For instance, the verbs [mana-tti hafu:] [k’omo k’ər] ‘to be left unmarried’ in both languages, respectively, take only nouns or pronouns referring to female human as their arguments. This grammatical rule of word collocation has been set by the socio-cultural practices of the language communities.

On the other hand, Afan Oromo has separate lexical items for the verb ‘to marry’ for male and female, that is, [fu:du:] and [he:rumu:], respectively. In this case, the feminine form has the meaning, ‘to be given in marriage’ while the masculine form has the meaning, ‘to be sold’ unlike the masculine form which has no negative connotation. To give light to how this has occurred, in Oromo society women get married in a way which is equivalent to ‘getting sold’. When women get married, their parents are compensated with bride prices. This is done to replace the physical labor that the woman used to render at her parents’ home. Hence, the verb [he:rumu:] which has a literal meaning, ‘to be sold’ expresses this cultural practice. This verb takes only feminine nouns as its argument as in, [hintall-i gurba:tti he:urunte], lit. ‘the girl has been sold to the boy’.

Likewise, the parallel Afan Oromo verb for male is [fu:du:] ‘to take woman for marriage’ only takes masculine nouns as its argument as in, [gurba:-n hintala fu:de], ‘the boy took the girl for marriage’. If any of these separate verbs switch their arguments as in [gurba:-n hintalatti he:rume], ‘the boy has been taken by the girl for marriage’ or [hintall-i gurba: fu:te] ‘the girl took the boy for marriage’, it would mean that the girl is physically or economically more powerful than the boy and she agitates him.” Therefore, the utterances augment the social status of the girl and at the same time it demeans the social status of the boy.

Unlike Afan Oromo, Amharic and Gamo do not have separate verbs for male and female. They just use the terms [magibat] and [ekidbə] ‘to marry’ but they distinguish the gender of the argument by affixing separate gender marking morphemes. Yet, this does not mean that the language speakers are better in terms of the socio-cultural gender bias involved in marriage practices and the roles of male and female in marriage lives. To that matter, the semantic asymmetry between the nouns [abba: mana:/ha:da mana:], [bal/mist], and [adde/motfə] ‘husband/wife’ in all the three languages respectively express the power relation between men and women in the societies. In these societies, it is the husband that is supposed to be more powerful and lead the wife in the way he fancies. In addition, the metaphorical meanings of the terms ‘husband’ and ‘wife’ among the three societies shows the existence of male domination.

Culturally, among the three societies, women get married only when chosen by men. However, linguistically, this is manifested only in Afan Oromo and Amharic. Accordingly, the Afan Oromo and Amharic verbs [haftu:taʔu:], [k’omo mək’ər] ‘to be left over/not chosen for marriage’, respectively, show this socio-cultural bias in the language communities. If women are not chosen for marriage they are denoted as [haftu:], [k’omo k’ər] ‘leftover’. These phrases have negative social meanings. In addition, the absence of parallel words that denote males that are left unmarried by any chance among the Oromo and the Amhara, shows linguistic bias.

Traditionally, among the Oromo, the Amhara, and the Gamo one of the duties of women is rearing as many children as possible because children provided the husbands with manual power. However, this is linguistically expressed only in Afan Oromo and Amharic. Accordingly, the phrase [idʒo:lle: abba: mana: iʃe:f horte], [lobaluwa liʤoʧ wələdəʧilət], ‘she gave children to the father of the house/husband’ also show the power imbalance between the husbands and the wives that is reflected by the ‘giver-taker’ positions assumed in the phrases. In these particular cases women are at the serving position and men are at the position of getting served. What is more, among the societies, male and female are at the superior and subordinate positions respectively. He is the administrator while she is the administered. In contrast, though not linguistically expressed, the cultural gender bias among the Gamo society with regards to husband and wife matches with that of the Oromo and the Amhara.

Generally, among the traditional Oromo, Amhara, and Gamo societies the patriarchs were members of families with the highest socio-cultural hierarchy. They controlled and exploited their wives and children. They were always
expected to be leaders in the families and wives were considered as men’s properties. As a result, terms that express marriage related activities and gender roles of husbands and wives in the languages of the societies reflect these facts. Incidentally, there are some degree of linguistic variations among the three societies though.

**Metaphors of Terms for ‘Man/Boy’ and ‘Woman/Girl’**

In this section, we will see linguistic sexism which manifests through connotative meanings of terms that denote male and female human beings in Afan Oromo, Amharic, and Gamo. As this study unraveled, among the three languages, terms that refer to male are used metaphorically to express concepts that have positive social values. On the contrary, those that refer to female are used to express concepts with negative social values. In view of that, terms like, [di:ra/gurba:, wond/ wond lidʒ], [adde/naʔa] ‘man/boy’ are used figuratively to express concepts such as ‘heroism’, ‘cleverness’, ‘strength’ and ‘bravery’. Quite the reverse, terms such as [dubarti:/ durba:], [set/liʤagərəd], and [māl'[i/naʔi] ‘woman/girl’ are metaphorically used to express negative concepts like cowardice, rumormonger, weakness, and shyness.

**Use of masculine Man/He as Generic**

This section deals with how some terms in Afan Oromo, Amharic, and Gamo define the male gender as normative or generic in light of the socio-historical lives of the speakers of the three languages.

The three linguistic groups are patriarchal societies. Traditionally, among these societies, [abba:], [abbat], and [owd] ‘the patriarch’ was the head of his family, he is in command of political, social, and economic lives of his family in particular and the society at large. According to Alpher (1987), if a society is patriarchal, generic forms of different terms would be the masculine forms. The findings of this study also confirms Alpher’s argument too.

Currently, the past images of the patriarch in the traditional lives of the three societies are reflected through generic terms formed from masculine words like [abba:] of Afan Oromo and [owd] of Gamo which literally mean ‘father’, and [balabot], of Amharic which literally mean ‘husband’ serve as indefinite forms to express ‘ownership’.

Regardless of the obvious denotive meaning difference between the Amharic, the Afan Oromo, and Gamo terms mentioned above, one can say that the use of the terms as generic forms in all the three languages have resulted from women’s exclusion from leadership and property ownership among the societies. In other words, since men were in command of every important property among these societies, the generic terms that expressed ownership in their languages had taken the masculine forms.

What is more, in the past, among the three societies only the patriarchs or the eldest sons in the families represented their families in any domestic and public affairs. Therefore, the generic use of the masculine terms [abba:], [balabot], and [owd] which mean ‘oneself’ have originated from the past traditions of representations by the male.

Last but not least, masculine terms, like [nama], [saw], and [odd] ‘man’ and the masculine pronoun [isa], [issu], and [izök] ‘he’ are respectively used as generic forms in all the three languages. Unlike the other terms discussed above, the usage of these terms is common among other languages like English. Based on this observation, some scholars have examined the matter and reported two major problems that arise from using ‘he/man’ as generic in English. First, the usage confuses people as to whether one is referring to male alone or both male and female (Schneider and Hacker, 1973). Second, they were found to cause females think that they are unrepresented (Harrison 1975; Martyna, 1978). Therefore, scholars suggest that, these terms need to be avoided in generic expressions by using gender neutral terms like ‘humankind’ instead of ‘man’, and ‘they or s/he’ in place of ‘he’. Otherwise, they should be used along with their feminine counterparts as, ‘man/woman’ and ‘he/she’.

**Administration titles**

This section presents the sexism in administration titles of Afan Oromo, Amharic, and Gamo. As found out in this study, there are differences among the three languages regarding this issue. The differences have originated from basic language variations and significant socio-political differences of the history of the three linguistic groups. Therefore, to show the differences clearly, the socio-politically driven linguistic scenarios would be dealt with one by one.

To start with, until 1880s, the Oromo people used to be administrated by a traditional socio-political system called Gada. This administration system was democratic for the male while it marginalized women (Negaso, 2000). However, studies show that the Oromo women had better human right protections and respects than any other groups of women in their vicinities or even the current Oromo women (Amanuel and Hirut, 2014).

Women’s marginalization in political and military activities during the Gada system can be verified from the administration titles of the time. For instance, titles such as: [abba: gada:] ‘leader of the Gada council’, [abba: du:la:] ‘war leader’, [abba: dubbi:] ‘chief speaker of the Gada council’, and [abba: c’affe:] ‘chairman of the legislative assembly’ reflect male domination in the Gada administration system. These titles do not have feminine forms because practically, women were excluded from political and military activities. In fact, we cannot judge
the past with the present mentality. Nonetheless, it matters because language maintains this sort of gender bias through its conventions (Bonvillian 2000), and affects the present life style of a society.

To see how the past gender bias among the Oromo made its way to the present through language convention, one needs to see chronological political changes of the society. The Macha Oromo, (area of this study) started to abandon the Gada administration system in favor of kingship system in 1880s (Negaso 2000). Yet, this transformation did not bring women to leadership but it even worsened their subordination by denying them the human rights and respects they had during the Gada period. The then titles also confirm this fact. For example, masculine administration titles, [mərt:] ‘king’, [go:fta:] ‘lord’ do not have parallel feminine forms. Linguistically, the last noun [go:fta:] ‘lord’ seem to have [gi:fti:] ‘lady’ as its parallel. However, since ‘lord’ and ‘lady’ are not equal in status, the titles are also asymmetric. In Oromo society, someone who used to be addressed by the title [go:fta:], ‘lord’ was a male leader while [gi:fti:] ‘lady’ was only the title of a lord’s wife. So, woman addressed with this title did not have the right to lead.

The Macha Oromo’s kingship system which had some elements of the Gada system was altered by the Amhara king called Menelik II who conquered them around the year 1885. (c.f. Amanuel and Hirut, 2011) As a result of the conquest, the Oromo were forced to totally abandon the Gada administration system and adopted the feudal administration system introduced by Menelik II (Negaso, 2000). Regarding gender balance in administration, the feudal system by its nature was not a good political system elsewhere. Hence, it encouraged the continuity of male domination in administration arena. Hence, administration titles of the time verify this. For example, [abbə: lafa:] ‘land lord’, [abbə: koro:] ‘land owner’ do not have parallel feminine terms.

The socialist political system which has followed from the long stayed feudal system in Ethiopia, nominally preached that women are equal to men. However, it only organized them to form women’s associations which had insignificant role in political leadership. So, during this period, like women of any other Ethiopian ethnic groups, the Oromo women were not politically empowered. However, since Afan Oromo was not the language of administration in this period, there is no linguistic proof for this generalization.

In terms of holding political administration posts, the present seems to be better for Oromo women. Nowadays, a few women are seen on administration posts. Yet, as the contemporary administration titles in the language show, the past male dominance in political and social arenas still manifests through terms that refer to administration posts and profession titles. For examples masculine nouns [dura təʔ-a:] ‘chairman’, [bulf-a:] ‘administrator’, and [abbə: ganda:] ‘chairman of a village’ refer to administration posts in the present lives of the language community. These terms do not have feminine forms, in spite of the fact that currently women are allowed to hold the posts. In addition, the grammar of the language also allows the formation of parallel feminine titles by alternating feminine terms with the masculine ones. For instance, [abbə:] ‘father’ can be substituted with [ha:da] ‘mother’ to form [ha:da ganda:] ‘chairwoman’ of a village’. Furthermore, feminine gender markers [-e:ssu:] and [-itu:] can be altered with the masculine gender marker [-a:] to form feminine titles [dura t-e:ssu:] ‘chairwoman’ and [bulf-itu:] ‘female administrator’. So, the past gender bias ideology has made to the present through socially created gender biased linguistic convention (Amanuel and Hirut, 2011).

Having discussed the linguistic sexism in Afan Oromo administration titles, let us now see the scenario in Amharic in this regard.

Like the Oromo, the Amhara have been patrilineal and patriarchal society. However, there are visible differences among the political worldviews of the traditional administration systems of the two. Among these differences, the major one worth mentioning is the level of rights and respects given to women. In this regard, the traditional Gada system of the Oromo, which in fact was male dominated in many respects was much better (Amanuel and Hirut, 2014) than the Amhara’s long existed kingship system. The traditional political system of the later was not only male dominated but also disregarded women’s rights and respects. However, the Amharic language does not overtly show this reality.

Regarding administration titles, overtly, Amharic looks relatively a gender fair language. Many Amharic administration titles are gender neutral. For instance, titles like [gozii], ‘governor’, [astedaddi], ‘administrator’, [meni], ‘leader’, [aza2], ‘commander’, [lik’amenber], ‘chairperson’, [dedzazmat], ‘major general’, and so forth are gender neutral terms. To that matter, few other administration titles that are not gender neutral have feminine counterparts. Titles like [nigus/nigist], ‘king/queen’ and [geta/imabet], ‘lord/lady’ fall in this class. Nevertheless, traditionally, women had almost no political leadership positions among the society. So, it takes ideological investigations to depict the covert linguistic sexism involved with these titles.

A closer look in to the societal usages of gender neutral Amharic administration terms show that these terms are sexist. For instance, in Amharic there are some exclusively male personal names which are derived from political titles. For example, the male name [mrr-a], ‘he lead’ is derived from the gender neutral term [merr] ‘leader’ and [astedaddi], ‘you govern 2MS’ is derived from the gender neutral term, [astedadi], by suffixing masculine gender marker [-a] and by infixing the second person masculine gender marker, [-i-] respectively. However, these sort of names do not have feminine forms in spite of the fact that the morphology of the language allows this possibility by adding the feminine
gender markers [-t] and [-i] to form feminine names like, [merra-t] and [asedaddir-i] (Zelealem, 2003).

Furthermore, in spite of the existence of the feminine title [nigist] 'queen' which has the same root with the masculine [nigus] 'king' in Amharic, historically there were very few women who have ever taken the leadership positions among the Amhara. So, Amharic administration titles are covertly sexist.

So far, we have looked at how Afan Oromo overtly and Amharic covertly depict linguistic sexism through administration titles. Now, we will see what this linguistic scenario looks like in Gamo language. Like the Amhara, the Gamo practiced kingship political system of their own. However, this practice was altered by the same 1880’s Amhara’s conquest history discussed earlier in relation to the Oromo. So, administration titles in Gamo have two phases, that is, prior and post Amhara administration.

Prior to the conquest, the Gamo were led by a king. So, they had the term [kaʔo], which means king. Following from male domination in leadership, this term is masculine and it has no feminine form. The wife of a [kaʔo ] is called [godenitso] but someone with this title had no political leadership position. Other administration titles like [daːna], 'leader', [huduga], 'a leader subordinate to the king', [fomittà], 'political advisor', and etc. were also masculine titles.

The post conquest leadership practice introduced by the Amhara followed its source. So, the Amharic administration titles were borrowed into the Gamo language and used with minor morphological modifications. Thus, we find titles like [astadadare], ‘administrator’, [mare], ‘leader’, [azzaže], ‘commander’, [lik’amble], ‘chairperson’ in Gamo.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study tried to comparatively explore how linguistic sexism manifests through lexical items of Amharic, Afan Oromo, and Gamo. It also tried to explain its sources. As found out in this study, semantically asymmetric lexical items, semantic connotations of terms that denote male and female human beings, use of the masculine forms as generic, and administration titles among the three languages exhibit sexism.

Specifically, the study showed that some terms that express socio-cultural practices of the societies exhibit semantic asymmetries. The terms discussed under this section can only collocate with one of the genders. This has resulted from the socio-cultural gender stereotypes they express/ denote. For example, if we take cultural marriage practice in the language communities; it legitimizes male supremacy and female subordination. Hence, the separate terms for male and female express this situation. As a result, the grammar of the languages take up that as conventions and restrict the collocation of the two separate forms with both ganders.

Furthermore, the study unraveled that terms that refer to female are figuratively used to express different concepts that have negative social values. On the contrary, their masculine parallels are used to express concepts that have positive social values.

In addition, the study revealed that some masculine terms are used as generic forms among the three languages. This practice defines the male gender as a normative and challenges the visibility of women in the societies. What is more, it also creates communication barrier.

Last but not least, nouns referring to administrative posts in different historical periods of the three societies reflect male dominance in political arena. In addition, the study showed that male’s egoistic practice of the past has been transferred to the present socio-political lives of the societies through language conventions. At present, at least we could see a few women participating in administrative professions. Nevertheless, because of the past male dominance, we do not see some masculine titles representing females as well.

Boroditsky (2001), Gordon (2004), and Feigenson (2004) argue that language practices shape human thought. Therefore, the sexism in Afan Oromo, Amharic, and Gamo especially in the area of lexical asymmetry and figurative use of masculine and feminine terms may negatively influence the speakers’ thoughts. In other words, the fact that the languages grammatically place men and women on positive and negative ends respectively, may force the societies to think and act likewise (cf. Amanuel and Hirut 2011).

Therefore, to stop or reduce the linguistic sexism which manifest at the level of language conventions like the use of ‘man/he’ as generic and masculine administration titles that do not have parallel feminine forms, it is necessary to introduce gender neutral terms.

However, changing the linguistic features alone is not enough to deal with the gender imbalances in the societies. So, the ideological roots of the bias in the socio-cultural lives of the people should be examined and dealt with to change the whole scenario. As Tolstokorova (2005) argues, to counteract linguistic sexism, primarily in those countries that are not yet open to ideas of linguistic gender democracy, it requires meticulous theoretical elaboration. This would open a way for challenging the global civil society by showing that linguistic sexism is not only an ethical problem, but also primarily a violation of human rights. She suggests that this can be achieved through united efforts of researchers, women’s rights advocates, the mass media, NGOs, government structures, and all those who are concerned with the democratic developments worldwide.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.
REFERENCES


