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Chapter One

Language, Gender and Politics: A General Perspective

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1.0. Preamble

THE requirements of this short introduction to a festschrift on “language, gender and politics” are to (i) provide scholarly definitions of the terms, (ii) explain the connection between the terms and justify the necessity for research in these areas, and (iii) examine approaches to research in the areas.

2.0. The Concepts of Language, Gender and Politics

2.1. *Language and Linguistics*

A widely acknowledged characteristic of language is its enigmatic nature, which makes it arduous to define or describe. But we roughly identify three conceptions of language in current studies: the universal language of humans which is genetically acquired; the individual language(s) such as English, French, Yoruba and Swahili and their different varieties; and the uses of language in social contexts of communication (cf. Chilton, 2004). The focus of the first conception above is a study of the nature and general properties of language. In general linguistics, scholars have duly recognised the creative characteristic of language, its arbitrariness, conventionality, semanticity, structural dependency and recursiveness. And in descriptive linguistic, language is studied via the various levels of phonetics/phonology, morphology, syntax, lexis and semantics. These levels have been investigated generally via two major perspectives, viz. ‘autonomous’ linguistics such as the cognitive-oriented transformational grammar (of Noam Chomsky) or systemic grammar (of Michael Halliday) and applied linguistics or language as social action. According to Sealey and Carter (2004), the relationship between the two perspectives is that of historical contingency. In autonomous linguistics, the properties of

language are studied linguistically, the studies focus on language from and inside the social context of communication.

In applied linguistics, properties of language(s) are characterised as emergent products of the engagement of human practice with the material world. Because of this engagement, it becomes very clear, according to Sealey and Carter (2004: 82-83), that (1) languages are not entirely reducible to their material embodiment as sound waves (phonology) or written marks (graphic symbols) nor to processes taking place entirely within human minds (cognitive), nor yet to a set of interactional relationships between linguistic symbols (syntax); (2) they also have relevance both for human beings and for the material world; and (3) languages possess the ability to interact with their constituent elements – people, the material world and language itself. Furthermore, in a social realist's account of applied linguistics, Sealey and Carter (2004: 70) express the need to distinguish between three terms pertaining to language domains: (i) the 'real' domain which includes both the mechanisms internal to the human organism, which make language processing possible, and those properties and powers of language, which enable inter-subjective communication; (ii) the 'empirical' domain which refers to those aspects of language use or behaviour that are capable of perception by the human senses; and (iii) the 'actual' domain which refers to that part of reality which happens, as distinct from all those things which might have happened but did not. In other words, it is not all the real powers and properties of language that are manifested at the level of the empirical but some linguistic phenomena 'actualise' the 'real' to become empirical.

2.2. *Politics and Political Discourse*

Coming to the second term in the topic, 'politics', scholars agree that the term varies according to the situation and purposes of its usage. However, considering the implicit and explicit definitions found in both the traditional studies of politics and discourse studies of the subject, Chilton (2004: 4) observes two broad stands in which it is viewed as (i) a struggle for power between those who seek to assert and maintain their power and those who seek to resist it; and (ii) as co-operation in the sense of practices and institutions that a society has for resolving clashes of interest over money, influence, liberty and the like.

Cross-cutting the above orientation is also another distinction between 'micro' and 'macro'. At the micro level, there are conflicts of interest,

struggles for dominance and effects at co-operation between individuals, between genders and social groups of various kinds (Chilton, 2004). In these conflicts, struggles and efforts, a variety of techniques is used to achieve individuals' goals such as persuasion, rational argument, irrational strategies, threats, entreaties, bribes, manipulation and anything that will work (Jones, 1994; Yusuf, 2003). In contrast, at the macro level, there are the political institutions of the state which, in one view of politics, serve to resolve conflict of interest and which, in another view, serve to assert the power of a dominant individual (a tyrant) or group. Such state institutions in a democracy are enshrined in constitutions, in civil and criminal legal codes and precedent practices. Associated with these state institutions are parties and professional politicians with more or less stable social practices, while other social formations such as interest groups and social movements may play upon the stage.

Chilton (2004:5) observes that what is stinkingly absent in conventional studies on politics is attention to the fact that micro-level behaviours are actually kinds of linguistic action just as macro-level institutions are types of discourse with specific characteristics. For example, parliamentary debates and broadcast interviews, constitutions and laws are kinds of text or discourse. This, thus, reveals glaringly the limitation of political science studies that overlook a consideration of language roles in politics. Meanwhile, the analysis of political discourse is scarcely new, as this has been done using various approaches. Wilson (2001) has observed the growing interest in the area of political discourse since the early 1980s, with studies emerging across the globe. While many studies have adopted, explicitly or implicitly, a critical perspective (van Dijk, 2001), there has also been a variety of other approaches available, ranging from the descriptive linguistic to the psychological, pragmatic, textual and discursual. A growing trend is now observed in political discourse to combine social theory with linguistic theory (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak, 1997).

The term 'political discourse', like politics, is ambiguous. According to Wilson (2001), it is suggestive of, at least, two possibilities: first, a discourse type without explicit reference to political content or context. The potentially confusing situation arises, in the main, from definitions of the political in terms of general issues such as power, conflict, control or domination (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1993), since any of these concepts may be employed in almost any form of discourse. A possible way to avoid

these difficulties is for scholars to delimit their subject matter as being concerned with formal/informal political concepts and political actors, with politicians, and political environments to achieve political goals. Although this makes clearer the limits that might be placed on the conception of political discourse, there is room enough to allow, for example, analysts who themselves wish to present a political case to become, in one sense, political actors, and their own discourse to become political. In this sense, much of what is referred to as critical linguistics or critical discourse analysis relates directly to work on political discourse, not only because the material for analysis is often formally political, but also, perhaps, because the analysts have explicitly made themselves political actors.

Wilson (2001) asserts that while delimitations of the political are difficult to maintain in exact terms, they are, nevertheless, useful starting points. Equally, while one can accept that it is difficult to imagine a fully objective and non-political account of political discourse, analysts can, at best, and indeed should make clear their own motivations and perspectives. This may range from setting some form of democratic ideal for discourse, against which other forms of political discourse are assessed, to explicitly stating one's political goals in targeting political discourse for analysis. It, also, allows for more descriptive perspectives, where the main goal is to consider political language first as discourse and only secondly as politics. While language is always clearly central to political discourse, what shifts is the balance between linguistic analysis and political comment.

2.3. Gender and Gendered Discourse

'Gender', in broad terms, refers to the sex-role identity used by humans to emphasise the distinctions between males and females. *Encarta Encyclopedia* (2005) states that although the words 'gender' and 'sex' are often used interchangeably, sex relates specifically to the biological and physical characteristic which makes a person male or female at birth, whereas gender refers to the behaviours associated with members of that sex. Information on gender studies abound in various fields, especially biological, social and linguistic studies. A cursory look at gender issues discoursed from a linguistic perspective is appropriate here, given the orientation of discussion of this study.

Regardless of the vantage point from which research emanates, the study of gender and discourse does not only provide a descriptive account of male/female discourse. According to Kendall and Tannen (2001), it also

reveals how language functions as a symbolic resource to create and manage personal, social and cultural meanings and identities (cf. Yusuf, 1988, 1993 and 1997). In their review of work done on discourse and gender, Kendall and Tannen (2001) observe that early language and gender research tended to focus on (i) documenting empirical differences between women's and men's speech, especially in cross-sex interaction; (ii) describing women's speech in particular; and (iii) identifying the role of language in creating and maintaining social inequality between women and men. Later studies on the cultural influences on gender, language and society investigated gender differences as communication, gender-related patterns of talk, the 'difference' and 'dominance' debates, interaction between gender and other social identities and categories such as ethnicity, social class and sexuality.

Kendall and Tannen (2001: 566-560) indicate points of agreement as well as the most widely debated issues in gender discourse. Points of agreement listed include (i) The social construction of gender, which implies that the meaning of gender is culturally mediated and gendered identities internationally achieved (Goffman, 1976; Butler, 1990); (ii) the indirect relationship between gender and discourse, which implies that ways of speaking are not sex-linked (identified with every individual woman or man) but sex-class linked (associated with class of women or class of men (Tannen, 1994c); (iii) gendered discourse as a resource, which explains that cultural influences do not determine the form that a speaker's discourse will take but rather provide a range from which individual styles are chosen; and (iv) gendered discourse as a constraint, which underlies, for example, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's (1992: 473) exhortation that language and gender researchers examine women's and men's language use in 'communities of practice'¹. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet explain that 'speakers develop linguistic patterns as they act in their various communities in which they participate'. These sites of engagement are relevant to the relation between micro-actions and macro-social structures, because the relation between gender and language resides in the mode of participation available to various individuals within various communities of practices as a direct or indirect function of gender.

The most widely debated issue in gender and discourse, according to Kendall and Tannen (2004), is that of 'gender dualism', which has questioned the division of speech on the basis of a binary division of gender sex. However, a substantial number of studies have proved that sex-

or gender-based binary opposition cannot be summarily dismissed (Cameron, 1998). Meanwhile, Kendall and Tannen (2004: 559) aver that conceptualising gendered discourse as a resource and a constraint within a ‘framing’² approach may help to resolve continuing tensions in the field concerning the role of sex/gender binarity in a theoretical model of gender and discourse. The conception of gender discourse as resource accounts for diversity in speaking styles: many women and men do not speak in ways associated with their sex, preferring to use language patterns associated with the other sex; there is variation within as well as between sex groups; individuals create multiples and sometimes contradictory versions of femininity and masculinity; and women and men may transgress, subvert and challenge as well as reproduce societal norms. Conversely, the conception of gendered discourse as a constraint accounts for the stubborn reality that if women and men do not speak in ways associated with their sex, they are likely to be perceived as speaking and behaving like the other sex and to be negatively evaluated.

In conclusion, Kendall and Tannen (2004: 561) observe that the research on language and gender has increasingly become research on gender and discourse. Although variationist studies demonstrate a promising symbiotic relationship between quantitative and qualitative methods, a movement towards the study of language within specific situated activities reflects the importance of culturally defined meanings both of linguistic strategies and of gender. It acknowledges the agency of individuals in creating gendered identities, including the options of resisting the transgressing socio-cultural norms for linguistic behaviour. But it also acknowledges the socio-cultural constraints within which women and men make their linguistic choices and the impact of the constraints, whether they are adhered to or departed from.

3.0. The Connection of Language, Gender and Politics

The matter for discussion here is never to restate the ontological fact that language plays vital roles in understanding the subject of linguistics, politics and gender as the terms ‘applied linguistics,’ ‘political discourse’ and ‘gendered discourse’ already attest to. Instead, our intention is to pose a few questions that we expect the various contributions in this book and beyond to address:

- (a) Why the disciplines of language, politics and gender, as opposed to education, mathematics and science?

- (b) Are the disciplines connected in any way to warrant being researched together in a single book?
- (c) What new perspectives can a connection of the disciplines create for scholarship?

The first two questions will be addressed under this subheading, while the third coincides with the last subject of discussion in this introduction.

3.1. Why Language, Gender and Politics?

The topic above is not fortuitous, but, rather, a direct representation of the outcome of research focus of the guest beneficiary of this festschrift, Professor Yisa Kehinde Yusuf. In his inaugural lecture (Yusuf, 2006), he has this to say about the core of his research preoccupations over the years (p.1):

I set out on this journey with an interest in semantics... with a special interest in ambiguity and vagueness in English usage in electoral politics... then the focus of my research broadened to pragmatics... Subsequently, I discovered that the language of gender relations was another subset of sociopragmalinguistics... I accordingly extended my academic and research interest to Women and Language.

I presume that the organisers of this festschrift must have debated at one time or the other whether the topic should be language and politics or language and gender before they finally settled on the more encompassing one. After all, the more ground covered, the merrier for scholarship.

3.2. Are Language, Gender and Politics Connected?

Whether at creation or during evolution, language and society have been associated with human beings (Mithen, 1996), and politics and gender are about the immediate features of human sociality. Though from different viewpoints, Chilton (2004:28) claims that language and political behaviour can be thought of as based on the cognitive endowments of the human mind rather than as social practices, whereas Sealey and Carter (2004) propose that languages are emergent products of the engagement of the human practice with the material world; the connection between language and social action remains indubitable.

3.3. *New Perspectives the Connection Can Create for Scholarship*

As a complement to studies within disciplines, interdisciplinary research has a lot to contribute to knowledge (i) by extending the frontiers of knowledge in individual fields and (ii) by identifying and further consolidating on the concepts and features shared by diverse fields for the advancement of social life. Layder (2004) remarks that although interdisciplinary explorations are regarded with suspicion by those concerned 'to protect' their home disciplines from invited incursion from 'outside', such efforts serve constructively to bring together elements that cry out for some sort of rapprochement or integration. In this regard, such concepts as power, dominance, control, conflict, people, social context and class cut across the three areas of language, politics and gender, and attempts to understand them need not be restricted to the respective fields. Lastly, Fairclough (2003) asserts the assumption that language is an irreducible part of social life, didactically interconnected with other elements of social life, so that social analysis and research always have to take account of language, while, also, linguists have to provide useable frameworks for analysing spoken or written language for people in the social sciences and the humanities with little or no background in language study.

4.0 Approaches to Research in Language, Gender and Politics

The study of language, politics and gender can be addressed from several perspectives (linguistic, sociological and socio-psychological), and in various forms – epistemology, general social theories, middle-range theories, micro-sociological theories, socio-psychological theories, discourse theories and linguistic theories (cf. Wodak and Meyer, 2004:19). One approach that is language-centred but integrates components from the different perspectives above is applied linguistics, whose interest is to interrogate a social problem by identifying relevant social themes and subjecting them to socially relevant linguistic analysis. The concerns of three approaches that have caught the interest of scholars in recent times are briefly presented below. The approaches are: social realism, critical discourse analysis and the cognitive perspective.

4.1. *Social Realism*

A summary of the social realist theory for applied linguistics by Sealey and Carter (2004) contains the following major points (cf. Adegbite, 2006): (i). The social world is stratified into the levels of structure, agency and culture

(including language as an emergent property), each of which has distinct **properties** and powers (ii) In social/applied linguistics research, the **properties** and powers at this level can be accounted for in terms of domains: psychobiography and situated activity, representing agency; **social** setting and contextual resources, representing structure and culture as revealed through language (iii) Since some aspects of the domains mentioned above are not directly observable, social research cannot be well accounted for by approaches that are wholly empirical, i.e. variables. Therefore, a relational approach of both quantitative and qualitative methods needs to be followed theoretically and empirically. Sealey and Carter (2004:333) propose and exemplify a framework which contains five stages as follows:

- (i) formulation of general causal propositions on the basis of prior empirical research;
- (ii) refinement of propositions and identification of powers and properties of agency, structure and culture possibly relevant to outcomes;
- (iii) development of testable propositions regarding which powers in which context produce which outcomes;
- (iv) embarking on empirical research towards the identification of sets of outcomes designed to adjudicate theories formed in Stage iii; and
- (v) configuration focusing by identifying what works for whom and in what contexts.

4.2. *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)*

CDA represents one of the most influential approaches in recent times to analysing language as social practice (Wodak, 1997; van Dijk, 2001; Wodak and Meyer, 2004; Fairclough, 2003). Van Dijk (2001:352) describes it as "a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in social and political context". Fairclough (2003:110) gives a semantic picture of how CDA works as a form of language critique:

- (i) Focus on a social problem which has a semiotic aspect
- (ii) Identify obstacle to it being tackled through analysis of
 - (a) the network of practices it is located within
 - (b) the relationship of semiosis to other elements within the practice(s)
 - (c) the discourse (semiosis) itself, i.e. analysis of the order of discourse, text interaction and linguistic structure

- (iii) Consider whether the social order in a sense needs the problem
- (iv) Identify possible ways to pass the obstacle
- (v) Reflect critically on the analysis in i-iv.

4.3. The Cognitive Approach

Chilton (2004:198), queries the dominant trend in the analysis of political themes of power, language, conflict and co-operation, whereby discourse in society is not merely the interaction of human individuals but the actions of human individuals which are motivated, planned and executed, first of all, by natural networks in their skills. He then puts forward some hypotheses concerning (a) the specific political purpose of language-in-use and (b) the specific linguistic means that people use in speaking politically. These are highlighted thus:

- (i) Political discourse operates indexically
- (ii) Political discourse operates as interaction
- (iii) Interactions function to negotiate representations
- (iv) Recursive properties of language observe political interactions
- (v) Modal properties of language subserve political interaction
- (vi) Binary conceptualisations are frequent in political discourse
- (vii) Political representations are sets of role-players and their relations
- (viii) Political discourse draws on spatial cognition
- (ix) Political discourse involves metaphorical reasoning
- (x) Spatial metaphors make concepts of the group and identity available
- (xi) Political discourse has specific connections to the emotional centres of the brain
- (xii) Political discourse is anchored in multi-dimensional deixis.

4.4. Methodology in Language, Gender and Politics

The consideration of methodology here involves data collection, linguistic markers and other analytical procedures. Data collection procedures in applied linguistics, very often, derive from fieldwork and ethnography. Participant observation is normally considered as the primary research tool, but other data sources include scene, event and action surveys and texts from mass media coverage (reports and interviews) and official documents. Each of these sources which may be a mediational means relevant to the research question must be identified and focus groups focalised and thoroughly analysed (cf. Wodak and Meyer, 2004). Linguistic markers that

can vary as a function of social power are analysed and the focus on features foregrounded may be:

- (a) *Semantic*: focusing on sentence structures pertaining to phonology, syntax; and
- (b) *Pragmatic*: topic choice, speech acts, conversation principles, politeness, etc;
- (c) *Textual*: cohesion, coherence, genres and text types, inter-textuality, etc.;
- (d) *Discourse*: social context, turn takings, interruptions, kinesics and verbal non-lexical acts such as gestures, hesitations, laughter, etc.; and
- (e) *Literacy*: perspective/point of view, focalisation, figurative expressions.

Research must utilise both theoretical and empirical procedures to support each other in providing detailed analysis, interpretations and explanation of data. Although quantitative measurement may be useful in variables research, this needs to be supplemented by qualitative information about participants and contexts of events.

5.0. Conclusion

This introductory chapter has the mandate to foreground the expectations of contributions in later chapters of this book. But it has taken a step further to raise issues which, though are of interest in the connected areas of language and social research, extend beyond the limited confines of this text. The gist of the chapter is that an applied/sociolinguistic perspective be utilised for language-focused investigations and explanation of topics on socially related topics, issues and problems. The multiple dimensions of research methodologies and analyses, and available results and implications of such analyses, are matters that should interest scholars in the social sciences and the humanities for some time to come.

Notes

1. A community of practice refers to a group of people who come together around mutual engagement in some common endeavour.
2. Tannen's (1994) 'framing approach' is the approach by which a researcher asks, first, what alignment each speaker is establishing in relation to interlocutors or to the subject taught or task at hand; second, how these alignments balance the needs for both status and connections; and third, how linguistic strategies are functioning to create those alignments.

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