Neuterism: Towards a Theory in Gender Discourse

Acheoah, John Emike

Department of European Languages,

Faculty of Arts, Management and Social Sciences, Federal University, Birnin-Kebbi, Nigeria

Abstract: *Gender discourses are replete with the term "feminism" which is the discrimination against the female folk in different domains of society: politics, religion, education, etc. This paper evolves the novel term "Neuterism", and elucidates it beyond male-female sexist discourse. Neuterism is the discrimination which inanimate objects suffer as a result of institutionalized social behaviour in a particular geographical region. Hinging on Acheoah's Pragma-crafting Theory, this paper investigates linguistic and extra-linguistic behaviours in the Nigerian locale, where certain practices demonstrate the supremacy of one product (not necessarily consumer products) over the other(s); the stance of the researcher is that this practice is not yet noticed in gender discourse, as unacceptable as it is. The study concludes that Neuterism has implications in Feminism; since products are semiotic representations of both the female and male sexes, they can be used not only to subjugate other products, but also to subjugate females and establish male dominance.*

Keywords: *Neuterism, feminism, gender discourse, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, Pragma-crafting Theory*

1. INTRODUCTION

> *"The literature of gender discrimination has not noticed that non-humans suffer discrimination; in Nigeria, a buyer requests "macleans", and the seller brings out "close-up", because in the country, "macleans" is a cover-term for all brands of toothpastes."*

> Acheoah, John Emike (2014, personal communication.)

English categorizes gender into three: masculine (for male); feminine (for male) and neuter (for non-humans). Indeed, there is a tendency to despise the discrimination of non-humans, whereas such non-humans have cleavages with masculine and feminine genders, and are therefore potent non-verbal media for establishing and amplifying female subjugation and male dominance (adoration). I coined the term "Neuterism" from neuter gender, just as "Feminism" is formed from feminine gender. The paper merely draws attention to the practice in Nigeria, whereby certain products are subjugated. It is not an elaborate discussion. Rather, it is an attempt to extend gender discourse beyond the common Feminism which examines the discrimination of the female folk. The literature of gender discrimination does not consider a term such as "Masculinism" since male dominance is a natural, conventional, religious practice.

2. PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study is aimed at drawing scholarly attention to an hitherto unnoticed aspect of gender discrimination, and locate its implications both in the already existing literature and in related social phenomena; for example, how the discrimination of non-human objects such as consumer products, are extended to humans in advertisement, politics, religion, etc. In this short paper, an attempt is made to:

(i) register a new perspective in the literature – the perspective that even non-living things (neuter gender) suffer subjugation in society;

(ii) register a pioneer effort in the investigation of the implications of the social practice in Nigeria, whereby products are discriminated via naming process[1].

3. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

The analysis done in this paper is anchored by the Pragma-crafting Theory (cf. Acheoah 2015a). The concepts in the Pragma-crafting theory are explained in this section. They include:

(i) P-crafting: It is a two-fold umbrella term: it comprises Event and Text.

(ii) Event: The participants of discourse (interactive and non-interactive participants) constitute Event. While the interactive participants perform linguistic, extra-linguistic and psychological acts, the non-interactive participants do not, and even if they do, their acts are always unconnected to the communication at hand; see Acheoah (2014a) where the label, H_2, is used to refer to participants who are present in discourse, but are not speakers' interlocutors.

(iii) Text: Text captures the trio: Setting, Theme and P-crafting Features. "P-crafting Features" is a concept which has discrete theoretical notions demonstrated by the interactive participants in three different frames: linguistic acts, extra-linguistic acts and psychological acts.

(iv) Interactive participants: These are participants who make linguistic, extra-linguistic and psychological contributions to a communication event.

(v) Non-interactive participants: Although present in a communication event, the non-interactive participants do not make verbal or non-verbal contributions that concern the communication event.

(vi) Setting: This is the physical place in which a communicative event takes place as can be ascertained from pragmatic or linguistic data.

(vii) Theme: It is the message in Text as worked out by P-crafting Features.

 (viii) P-crafting Features: The features which enable participants of discourse to "p-craft" include: Indexicals (INDXLs), Shared Macro-knowledge (SMK), Shared Contextual Knowledge (SCK), Shared Knowledge of Emergent Context (SKEC), Geoimplicatures (GIs), Linguistic Implicatures (LIs), Behavioural Implicatures (BIs), Contextual Presuppositions (CPs), Pragmadeviants (PDs), Object Referred (OR) and Operative Language (OL). It is necessary to understand these concepts:

a) Inference (INFR) has to do with making logical conclusions from available contextual data.

b) Indexicals (INDXLs) include demonstratives, first and second person pronouns, tense, specific time and place adverbs like now and here, and a variety of other grammatical features tied directly to the circumstances of utterance (Levinson 1983:54).

c) Shared Macro-knowledge (SMK) is the totality of what the participants of discourse understand as states-of-affairs in the larger society, rather than in their immediate society.

d) Shared Contextual Knowledge (SCK) is background knowledge of participants in the physical context of communication.

e) Emergent Context (EC) is any situation that suddenly emerges in an on-going discourse, and can impinge on illocutionary and perlocutionary acts.

d) Geoimplicatures (GIs) was coined from "geographical" and "implicature" to refer to practices that have geographical restriction in terms of people, and not just in terms of physical boundaries; physical relocation does not remove the meanings from the psyche of the natives of that region where such meanings operate as OR in OL.

e) Linguistic Implicature (LI) are meanings implied through linguistic elements (language) of Text.

f) Behavioural Implicature (BI) are meanings implied through extra-linguistic and psychological acts.

g) Contextual Presuppositions (CP) are products of Shared Contextual Knowledge (SCK); in a specific (micro-context) physical context of discourse, participants deduce meanings from verbal and non-verbal data limited to the participants themselves. The meanings deduced are treated as background assumptions (BAs) which direct interlocutory roles. Decoders (DCs) imply that Encoders (ENCs) understand that certain Verbal Elements (VEs) and Non-verbal Elements (NVEs) are deduced or infered as Object Referred (OR) in Operative Language (OL).

h) Linguistic Acts: These include: speech acts (direct, indirect and Pragmadeviants); supra-segmental features (stress, intonation, rhythm, pitch); phones (Ssss, Shhh, Mmmm, Ehmnn); Exclamations (Wao!, Oh!, Ah!, Abah!); and lyrical music. Due to space constraints, these concepts as well as others cannot be elaborately explained in this

study. However, the concept, "phones", refers to speech features between the phoneme and the word. They are common components in both written and spoken discourses. Small as they are, they express emotions of various kinds besides having illocutionary potentials in context.

i) Extra-linguistic Acts: Extra-linguistic acts include: sociolinguistic variables (age, cultural background, social status/class, gender, relationship); non-lyrical music, drumming as well as semiotic particulars (weather, time, contextual object, colour, clothing, posture, perfume, location/position, size, body mark and silence), laughter, body movement).

j) Psychological Acts: These are the different emotions expressed through linguistic and extra-linguistic acts.

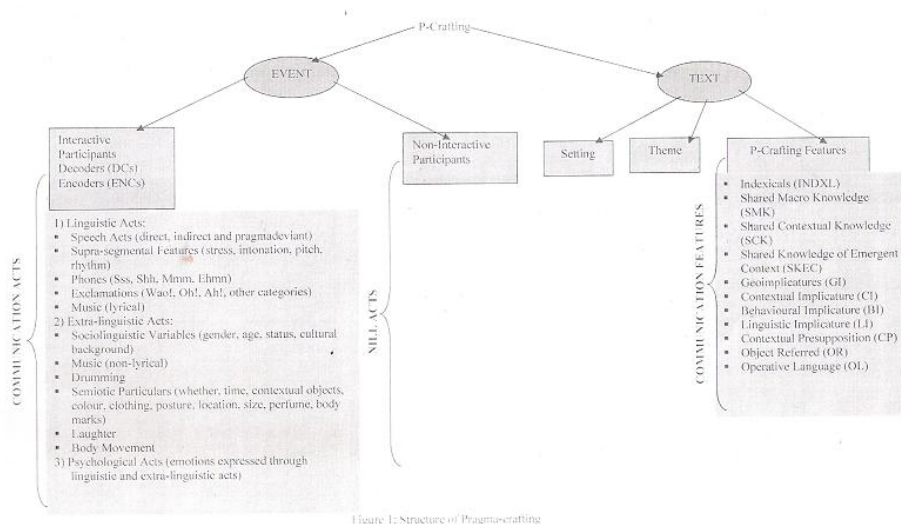Acheoah 2015a:23) presents the diagram below to explain operational concepts in the Pragma-crafting Theory:

Figure 1: *Operational Concepts in the Pragma-crafting Theory*

4. GENDER DISCOURSE

The literature of feminist discourse is over-burdened with the discussion of Feminism from the traditional perspectives: certain human nomenclatures are indices of female discrimination; and human names which convey gender discrimination, have gender or gender-like suffixes as in the names "doctor" or "professor", where the former is not suffixed whereas the latter carries a suffix that is not gender-based.

The struggle for dominance between the male and female gender is an unending, age-long discourse. Different religions and myths are supportive of male dominance. However, there are men and women who are not supportive of male dominance, and so protest in diverse ways for the repositioning of the women-folk in different facets of society, particularly the socio-economic and political spheres. Obafemi (2006:16) cites James Blamires (1991:374) who notes that discrimination against women is not informed by female inferiority. Rather, it is a product of the age-long male dominance in human societies; Blamires thesis was argued on some premises, part of which is the fact that Adam was the source of Eve's creation. Consider Harry (1991) who paints the picture of the discrimination of women very clearly:

> "While art, literature and philosophy are essentially attempts to find the world anew on a human liberty, that of the individual creator ... women are so moulded and indoctrinated by tradition that they are prevented from assuming the status of beings with liberty. Meanwhile, a conspiracy is kept alive which implies that women by nature lack creative genius."

Obafemi (ibid.:20) submits that "because of the generally acknowledged and apparently sustained unequal patterns of relationship in favour of the male gender in socio-economic and political terms, gender theories and policies largely focus on the constraints, obstacles and struggle of women to redress a culture of subjugation, subservience and the essence of reconstructing those patterns of relationship in favour of female gender."

5. SOCIO-PRAGMATICS OF NEUTERISM

In this section, I highlight and examine the socio-pragmatic motivations of Neuterism:

5.1 Abstract Nouns

A particular concept may be used to name its counterparts. When a Nigerian says "No blow big, big grammar fo me", he/she means "Do not speak to me with high-sounding vocabulary items"; therefore, Nigerians subsume all aspects of English (Grammar, Lexis, Phonetics, etc.) in "Grammar," and make "Grammar" a super-ordinate term for other aspects of proficiency in English.

5.2 Descriptives

In different facets of life, positive features of the female folk are explored as paralinguistic or non-verbal accompaniments to achieve illocutionary goals[2]. This paper contends that so long as some of such positive features are also possessed by the male folk, naming some objects as female objects and others as male objects, and thereby or transferring some form of discrimination to males via paralinguistic elements of communication, is a demonstration of Neuterism. Bach and Harnish (1979) evolve Descriptives in their speech act taxonomy. In Descriptive speech acts, S declares that a particular quality is possesed by a person, place or thing. That is, S expresses "the belief that O is F" and "the intention that H believes that O is F" (p.42). Examples are appraise, asses, call, categorize, characterize, classify, date, describe, diagnose, evaluate, etc. Neuterism therefore shows that expressions used to subjugate sexes have referents in social system. Thus, when a buyer requests macleans and the trader brings out close-up, there is no communication breakdown because both the buyer and the trader have mutual contextual belief concerning the item that was requested.

Allan (1986) who contends that utterances have "world-spoken-of" presents similar view[3].

It is observed, that some of the regional nomenclatures for vehicles   depict a discrimination of the female gender. For example, "Honda Bulldog" which is the nick-name of a particular type of motor vehicle, portrays male as being stronger and more dependable than female. Similarly, the name "Baby Boy" suggests that the larger size of that brand of car is more suitable for males than for females. Whether or not these claims are plausible, the fact that they are blown out of proportion, makes them count as gender discrimination. Since some vehicles that are given feminine nomenclatures are even more masculine in function, one wonders why such vehicles or their female users suffer Neuterism.

5.3 Hyponyms and Co-hyponyms

This has to do with subjugating an item by referring to it by the name of one of its counterpart as in macleans-close-up relationship.

5.4 Zero Hyponymy

In this case, there is no co-hyponym, yet the social system uses Ascriptives in a wide range of non-human objects on the bases of the colour, tenderness, shape, etc. of such objects, even if such objects are unisex. When a man buys a car, and he is told to give the car to his wife and buy a "man's car" (these are common happenings in Nigeria), it is a socially realistic phenomenon.

The process of naming a set of similar objects by using the name of one of such objects (e.g. when all brands of toothpastes are called macleans) may be informed by:

(i) the fact that the super-ordinate item (object) existed before its counterparts;

(ii) the reliability, efficacy, usefulness, durability, versatility and general acceptability of the super-ordinate object.

6. SAMPLES OF NEUTERISM

The following corpora represent neuterism in the Nigerian speech community; each corpus is a cover-term for its "counterparts" (I have preferred this word for non-living things for thematic, idiosyncratic reason):

- "bata" for all kinds of shoes;

- "bic" for all kinds of pens;

- "machine" for motor-cycles (all kinds) only;

- "mineral" for soft-drinks (all kinds) only;

- "iron" for pressing iron (all kinds) only;

- "cream" for pomade (all kinds) only;

- "Green" for a particular vegetable only (whereas others are green vegetables);

- Vaseline for all brands of pomade.

7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Communicative elements characterized as Neuterisms are part of Nigerian English corpora. Nigerian English discourse is not a recent issue. In different fields of language study (phonology, morphology, semantics, pragmatics, etc.), scholars establish critical positions on the status of Nigerian English amidst world Englishes. It is a fact that discourse is peculiar and fascinating in non-native regions. In Nigeria, discourse is not merely a mechanical process. It also involves creativity on the part of Nigerian speakers of English. Instances of violation of the norms of English are a sign of the re-invention of English in non-native regions. Indeed, the language is able to alienate the native speakers as seen in the gender dimensions of the nativization of English in Nigeria (Neuterisms). Although the elements that depict Neuterisms count as regional stigmatizations, I contend that they do not "degrade" Nigerian English within the ambit of world Englishes, so long as they enable speakers achieve illocutionary goals. It is clear therefore, why the Encyclopedia Americana (1994 Vol.22:514) defines pragmatics as "the subfield of the study of language that investigates the techniques by which language is processed for communication purposes." To understand the socio-pragmatic motivations of Neuterisms, one needs to consider the participants, their shared knowledge of verbal and non-verbal elements of communication (such as shared macro-knowledge (SMK), shared contextual knowledge (SCK) and shared knowledge of emergent context (SKEC)), the contextual underpinnings which direct the selection of communication elements (such as contextual implicatures (CI) and contextual presuppositions (CP)), and a wide range of other discourse phenomena – which according to the Pragma-crafting Theory include: the conventions of the operative language (OL), object referred (OR), pragmadeviants (PDs), behavioral implicatures (BIs), the pragma-dynamics of the linguistic, extra-linguistic and psycholinguistic acts enacted in discourse. If sociolinguistics is to be rightly understood as the study of language and society, then the various social variables which produce and interpret Neuterisms are crucial to the analyst. Acheoah (2011) evolves the concept "Geoimplicature" to elucidate the relationship between linguistic behaviours and social situations and functions. Lucas (2002:33) observes that "communication depicts a process by which meanings (often times abstract or subtle)) are exchanged among individuals, groups or organizations through a system of mutually shared words, signs and symbols." It is not incidental that Neuterisms constitute Nigerian speakers' identity. Scholars acknowledge that Social Identity Theory recognizes the fact that social stereotypes (the process of ascribing characteristics to individuals based on group membership) help people to systematize their world since more importantly, when people affirm their stereotypes, such features become identities. The data presented in this paper indicates that Neuterisms are so communicative that encoders do not need to process them before decoders can understand them. Language cannot have communicative potentials if the utterances it employs are not message-laden. Utterances have contents which count as their meanings. In the use of the English Language, the Nigerian speakers' linguistic choices are informed by illocutionary goals irrespective of the norms of English. The Communicative Model Theory – see Lawal (2012) for this – explains that in effective discourse, the medium of communication is inevitably determined by the message as the speaker or writer hinges on various stylistic devises

including pragmatically informed lexical deviants. Acheoah (2015b) illustrates the process of re-inventing (indigenizing) English in Nigeria through the figure below:
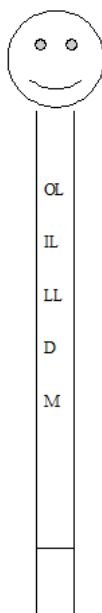

Figure 1: *Scope and Process of Indigenization*

Key:

OL: (Operative Language)

IL: (Indigenized Language)

LL: (Linguistic Level)

D: (Domain)

M: (Meaning)

Figure 1 above presents English as the Operative Language which is re-invented by Nigerians to produce the Nigerian English corpora at different levels of linguistic analysis, including morphology, pragmatics and semantics. Nigerianisms (e.g. Neuterisms) are produced from different facets of human endeavour (domains). Such facets include politics, commerce, health, entertainment industry, sports, religion, education, etc. Each element of Neuterism/Nigerianism has a meaning or meanings which are essentially the states-of-affairs they address. Therefore, Nigerian English corpora do not exist in a vacuum.

Language is a tool for social interaction hence, context phenomena cannot be excluded from it. Fowler (1981:10) opines that "linguistic structure is not arbitrary, but is motivated and determined by the functions it performs." Leech (1983) reports that he "did not attempt cross-cultural comparison of communicative behaviour, but acknowledges that research into the area would be fascinating." He observes that the transfer of the norms of one community into another may well lead to pragmatic failure.

The use of language to depict gender themes (positively or negatively) is motivated by extra-linguistic forces in different regions or speech communities: norms, values, existential experiences, socio-cultural nuances impinge on the pragma-lexico-semantic dimensions of language in Nigeria and in other parts of the world. Therefore, compliance and non-compliance to linguistic conventions are instances of effective communication. Acheoah (2015c) underscores extra-linguistic motivations for language use to establish the strengths and weaknesses of Austin's pragmatic theories. Neuterism is partly a neo-feminist discourse in the sense that there is a sexist, socio-pragmatic link between the process of ascribing properties to products and the human (masculine and feminine) gender such properties ("Ascriptives", a term in Bach and Harnish's speech act taxonomy) they represent. Language

has positive and negative connotations. Every society operates as a social system where attitudes, values, norms and practices are internalized and institutionalized. It is significant, that for the first time in the literature, the term "Neuterism" is evolved to have collocation with Feminism.

Notes

1. The term "Geoimplicature" captures the interpersonal function of language built around the "everydayness" of users of the language in any given geographical region.

2. Gender discrimination can take paralinguistic dimensions e.g. when a commercial product shows the picture of a superman to convey the message that the product is strong and reliable; whereas notions that are often conveyed through female pictures are inconsequential.

3. Another scholarly work in this regard, is Searle (1969) where the notion, "direction-of-fit", is used to capture the idea that utterances have referents in the world. Searle uses a downward arrow to indicate this phenomenon.

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