

**FEMINIST LANGUAGE AS A SOCIOLINGUISTIC VARIABLE FOR ENACTING CHANGE: A STUDY OF ADICHIE, JUDD, OBAMA AND PEREZ'S SPEECHES**

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DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.16636.28806

**Abstract**

*This work is a qualitative study of the variation of language employed by feminists using Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Ashley Judd, Michelle Obama and Caroline Criado Perez's speeches. In language, a lot of studies have been done in sociolinguistics on the language used by women and men but only little has been done on the language of feminists. The aim of this study therefore is to show that feminist language is a shift which varies from the stereotypical characteristics previous studies have identified as the language of women. This study identified the salient features of language used by these feminists in their speeches as well as the effects of these features. Purposive sampling procedure was used in the selection of the feminists whose speeches were analyzed. The population of study is six transcripts of speeches drawn from four notable women adjudged to be feminists. The theoretical foundation is anchored on the Social Constructionist Theory which states that realities are constructed through language and that gender is a social construction. The findings of this study revealed seven features of language in the speeches of feminists. They are: Rhetorical question, Mundane expressions, Inclusive pronouns, Direct Speech, Parallelism, Content adjectives and collocations. These linguistic features are characteristics of feminist language and are therefore different from what previous researchers have identified as features of women's speech. It is therefore recommended that men and women who aspire to be feminists should use more of this variation which the researchers termed "FemTalk" in order to enforce change. It is also hoped that "FemTalk" will be yet another addition to the growing studies on gender and language studies.*

**Introduction**

Language is a combination of words or a tool used by human beings for communication and exchanges. It is made of sounds or graphic symbols which

users or speakers have accepted to use as units of communication. This means that language does not exist in abstraction. It is used for communication. Human beings use language for communication and other forms of interactions including transactions and exchanges. Language in turn becomes a symbol of identity for human beings. Human beings give relevance to language. Okoh (2003, p.254) opined that in “language, we discover a form of social behaviour, closely bound up with, and serving to express, a people’s entire cultural accoutrements”. It becomes obvious that language reflects the traditions, norms, beliefs and values of a people.

Akmajian, Demers, Farmer and Harnish (2008) observed the role of language in relation to its operation in the society. In a society language is unique to individuals that make up the society. Language is a mirror of mind on a deep significant sense. It is a product of human intelligence, created anew in each individual by operations that lie far beyond the reach of will or consciousness (Akmajian, Demers, Harnish & Fisher 2008, p.9) Language is used by people in the society and the society in turn influences the outcome of language. Robin (1985) opined that “language is a symbol system based on pure or arbitrary convention infinitely extendable and modifiable according to changing needs and the conditions of the speakers” (Cited in Syal & Jindal 2010, p. 10). We can deduce from these definitions that language is dynamic and not static. It evolves; it changes to meet the needs of members of the society. It is in vein that the study of Sociolinguistics becomes not just valid but indispensable.

Sociolinguistics is the study of how language relates with the society, how language is used in the society and how language is influenced by speakers in the society. It is an examination of language and its behaviour in the society. It is concerned with the role of language as a social and cultural phenomenon (Nwala, 2015).

Gender as a social construct is made manifest through language and thus in turn affect the way men and women speak in the society. The roles expected of a man or a woman is depicted through language (Coates, 2013). Umera-Okeke (2015, p-558) argued that:

The division into masculine and feminine social roles has given rise recently to a constructionist and dynamic view of gender. Under this new conception, gender is not a fixed category but may vary depending on the speech situation and the type of interaction that takes places.

This means that gender roles are not biological construct but are social constructs which have become acceptable over the years. Gender roles are social behaviours constructed by patriarchal values. Abbas (2003) opined that gender is not a fixed category; it is subject to change and is negotiated according to the event, activity and context, thus, males and females negotiate a continuum of femininity and masculinity (gender roles), which is conditioned by its linguistics marking and the role they have in a particular activity or situation. However, these roles are not static, they are subject to change. Gender roles which are made manifest through language are constructed by societies. This is why the English language today is regarded as a “Sexist” language because of the way it fosters dominance of women by men. A good example is the use of the generic term “he” to refer to both men and women thus presenting women as mere appendages to men (Sunderland, 2006). Sexism is an inherent belief that people of a particular gender (usually male) are superior to the other gender (female). The reaction against this long-standing belief of the superiority of men over women is what gave rise to feminism.

Feminism is a reaction against patriarchy (a system of government or society in which men are more favoured or preferred) and its various forms of manifestation including language. Feminism is a political movement that advocates for the socio-political equality in the treatment of men and women (Mills, 2008). This important movement of change can be achieved through language. Activities and gender roles are manifested through language; it can equally be deconstructed through language. Language is thus a powerful weapon used to bring about change or to establish a notion in the society. Mills(2008) said that language is “a tool which is drawn on strategically by both sexists and feminists’ campaigners, and as a site of struggle over word-meaning, which is also often a struggle over who has the right to be in certain environments, speak in certain ways, hold certain jobs” (p. 2)

This work therefore examined feminist language as a sociolinguistic variable for enacting change using the selected speeches of some feminists. The effects of salient features identified as characteristics of feminists’ language is equally foregrounded. The focus on the feminists picked for this study is not really based on any strand of feminism since no strand be it radical, liberal, cultural or social feminism is completely independent of the other and also since they all have common core values which are the fight for the socio-political equality of women and men and the liberation of women from repressive patriarchal postulations. Furthermore, the speeches of these feminists cut across the different strands of

feminism, hence the need to focus on the values and ideals of feminism as a political and social movement irrespective of the strand. The theoretical foundation on which this work bears on is the Social Constructionist theory which sees language as an instrument for the construction of reality.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **1. The Social Constructionist Theory**

The social constructionist theory is one of the approaches to the study of language and gender. Social constructionist theory originated from Berger and Luckman's Publication on *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) and since then it has continued to evolve to include areas of interests such as language and gender. The social constructionist approach to gender and language was further developed by Mary Crawford in *Talking difference* (1995). Within this theory, language and gender are viewed not from biological point of view but as a social Construction.

From a social constructionist perspective, language and discourse are those systems of meaning that produce rather than reflect gender as an important and salient social category (Weatherall, 2002). The major concern of the constructionist is that language and gender are social constructions which are produced and reproduced through discourse. Naturally, our thoughts are aligned with our language. In any society, individuals in that society learn language in a social context which in turn influences their patterns of thought.

### **2. Feminism**

Feminism is a movement that advocates for a destruction of structures and political or social ideologies that sustain and reinforce the subjugation and oppression of women in the society. Feminism is a movement that advocates for the socio-political equality of the sexes; it seeks to redress the discrimination of women in work places and politics. Mc Bride and Mazur (2008, p. 235) opined that "feminist movements involve specific challenges to patriarchy and the subordination of women."

Mc Bride and Mazur (2008) further identified three key objectives of feminist struggle:

1. The goal of changing the position of women in politics and society at large
2. A challenge to change women's dominance by men through gender equity
3. A challenge to change the structures of gender-based hierarchies.

Feminist language activism is aimed at destroying linguistic sexism which is manifested when language features represent or depict the inferiority of one sex against the other. Atkinson (1993, p. 403) defined linguistic sexism as a “wide range of verbal practices including not only how women are labeled and referred to, but also how language strategies in mixed sex interaction may serve to silence or depreciate women as interactants.

### **Previous Study on Difference in Men and Women’s Speech**

From the instances of previous studies, we noticed that women’s language is depicted as inferior as opposed to men’s speech. Talbot (2003, p. 475) identified male and female conversational styles thus:

<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>
Sympathy	Problem solving
Rapport	Report
Listening	Lecturing
Private	Public
Connection	Status
Supportive	Oppositional
Intimacy	Independency

Talbot further noted that these styles are equally stereotypical and that individuals differ in their language use. Wardaugh (2006, p.322) still on the difference in men and women speech noted,

Women are also said not to employ the profanities and obscenities men use, or, if they do, use them in different circumstances or are judged for using them... Women are also sometimes required to be silent in situations in which man may speak.

Jespersen (1992) opined that women have smaller vocabularies, show extensive use of certain adjectives and adverbs more than the men and that they equally tend to break off without finishing their sentences and the reason is because women start talking without having thought out what they are going to say and they equally use fewer complex sentences (Sunderland 2006). Women have been reduced to thoughtless chattering beings whose language use reflects their

subordinate status to the point that a man can be mocked for speaking like a woman. Rochefort (1665) wrote:

The men have a great many expressions peculiar to them, which the women understand but never pronounce themselves. On the other hand, the women have words and phrases which the men never use, or they would be laughed to scorn. Thus, it happens that in their conversations it often seems as if the women had another language than the men (Cited in Sunderland 2006, p.6)

Also, Lakoff (1973 p. 47) said that features of women's language were evident in levels of the English Language. At the lexical level women use:

- a. Precise colour descriptors, e.g., mauve, beige, lavender
- b. More empty adjectives, e.g., divine, lovely
- c. Weaker expletives, e.g., dear me, oh fudge

At the syntactic level women use more:

- a. Tag questions: Jane is here, isn't she?
- b. Hedges (signaling uncertainty), e.g., sort of, you know
- c. Indirect request forms, e.g., Will you please close the door?

Again, studies carried out by Holmes and Stubbe (2003) showed the following difference in women and men's speech:

<b>FEMININE</b>	<b>MASCULINE</b>
Indirect	Direct
Conciliatory	Confrontational
Facilitative	Competitive
Collaborate	Autonomous
Minor Contribution (in public)	Dominates (public talking time)
Supportive feedback	Aggressive interruptions
Person/ process oriented	Task/ outcome oriented
Affective oriented	Referentially oriented

Feminist activists have argued that these features of women's speech are culturally imposed; therefore, a change in the position of a woman would result in language change while others have classified some of the features of women's speech as stereotypes since women are different and should therefore have

different voices. Kippers (1987) opined that any view that women's speech is trivial, gossip-laden, corrupt, illogical, idle, euphemistic, or deficient is highly suspect" (Wardaugh 2006, p.317).

**Features of Feminist Language**

Feminist language differ from women’s speech in their use of the following features:

- A) The Use of Rhetorical Questions
- B) The Use of Mundane Expressions
- C) The Use of Direct Speech
- D) The Use of Parallelism
- E) The Use of Inclusive Pronoun
- F) The Use of Content Adjectives
- G) The Use of Collocations

These are exemplified in the speeches under study and presented in the tables below

**Table 1: Rhetorical Questions in Feminist Speeches**

<b>Name of Speakers</b>	<b>Extracts of Rhetorical Questions from the Speeches</b>
<b>Adichie</b>	Today women in general are more likely to do the house work than men, the cooking and cleaning. But why is that? Is it because women are born with a cooking gene? Or because, over the years they have been socialized to see cooking as their role?... I remember that the majority of the famous cooks in the world, whom we give the fancy title of “chefs” to are men. b) Is domestic work really neutral? Or do women do majority of it?
<b>Judd</b>	Why are pads and tampons still taxed when Viagra and Rogaine are not? Is your erection really more than protecting the sacred messy part of my womanhood? Is the bloodstain on my jeans more embarrassing than the thinning of your hair?... Scarlett Johnson, why were the female actors paid less than half of what the male actors earned last year?
<b>Obama</b>	... if all of this is painful to us as grown women, what do you think, this is doing to our children? What message

	are our little girls hearing about who they should look like? How they should act? What lessons are they learning about their dreams and aspirations?
<b>Perez</b>	Feminism cares that when women are murdered, as we are on a weekly basis, that we barely get a mention in the news, because well, how can a weekly occurrence be news? b) Why is this (voilence against women)happening?

**Table 2: Mundane Expressions in Feminist Speeches**

<b>Name of Speakers</b>	<b>Extracts of Mundane Expressions from the Speeches</b>
<b>Adichie</b>	We teach girls that they cannot be <u>sexual</u> beings in the way that boys are... recently a young woman was <u>gang raped</u> in a university in Nigeria
<b>Judd</b>	And our <u>pussies</u> ain't for grabbing... our <u>pussies</u> are for our pleasure... Is your <u>erection</u> really more than protecting the sacred messy part of my womanhood? Is the <u>bloodstain</u> on my jeans more embarrassing than the thinning of your hair?
<b>Obama</b>	This was a powerful individual speaking freely and openly about <u>sexually</u> predatory behaviour, and actually bragging about <u>kissing</u> and <u>groping</u> women
<b>Perez</b>	And she goes on because she knows that her <u>vagina</u> is not shameful. b) ...these men who were saying they were going to shove poles up my <u>vagina</u> , shove their <u>dicks</u> down my throat...are misogynistic <u>dick</u> heads...who are scared. We dont want to give these <u>assholes</u> the satifaction of shutting us up, putting us back in our place, sending us back to the kitchen and having us make them a sandwich.

**Table 3: Direct Speech in Feminist Speeches**

<b>Name of Speakers</b>	<b>Extracts of Direct Speech from the Speeches</b>
<b>Adichie</b>	I was not worried at all. In fact, it had not occurred to me to be worried because a man who would be



	<p>intimidated by me is exactly the kind of man I would have no interest in.</p> <p>b) I simply watched the world. I knew that the world did not give to women the same dignity it gave to men. I was aware of how much the socialization of women was focused on men.</p>
<b>Judd</b>	<p>My name is Ashley Judd and I am a feminist. And I want to say hello to Independent Avenue in the back, all the way down to 17<sup>th</sup> street, and I bring you words from Nina Donovan....</p>
<b>Obama</b>	<p>So, I'm going to get a little serious here because I think we can all agree that this has been a rough week in an already rough election. This week has been particularly interesting for me personally because it has been a week of profound contrast.</p>
<b>Perez</b>	<p>I always say that violence against women is the front line of feminism. It's the fallout from all the other injustices women face around the world.</p> <p>b) So, yes I am a feminist 'Hi' and today I'm going to talk to you about my activism and about gender inequality in general. I'm going to talk to you about bank notes which is a campaign that I started and ran between April and July this year.</p>

**Table 4:Parallelism in Feminist Speeches**

<b>Name of Speakers</b>	<b>Extracts of Parallelism from the Speeches</b>
<b>Adichie</b>	<p>a) And so, girls grow up to women who cannot say they have desire. They grow up to be women who silence themselves. They grow up to be women who cannot say what they truly think. And they grow up- and this is the worst thing we do to girls- they grow up to be women who have turned pretense into an art form.</p> <p>b) I'm angry that women in South Korea are protesting about hidden cameras that invade their privacy. I'm angry about domestic violence all over the world, in</p>

	Italy there is a woman killed every week by an intimate partner. I'm angry that in Africa women cannot inherit property because they are women. I'm angry that in Latin America women are dying because government decides that they cannot do anything over pregnancies that they no longer want.
<b>Judd</b>	I am not nasty like the combo of Trump and Pence being served up to me in my voting booths. I'm nasty like the battles my grandmothers fought to get me into that voting booth. I'm nasty like the fight for wage equality. Scarlett Johnson, why were the female actors paid less than half of what the male actors earned last year? See, even when we do go into higher paying jobs our wages are still cut with blades sharpened by testosterone...
<b>Obama</b>	...We need someone who is a unifying force in this country. We need someone who will heal the wounds that divides us, someone who truly cares about us and our children, someone with strength and compassion to lead this country forward. And let me tell you, I'm here today because I believe with all of my heart that Hillary Clinton will be that President.
<b>Perez</b>	Feminism is when Wendy Davis stands on her feet for ten hours and talks to a house dominated by men who don't care to hear her words, to prevent law makers in the United States from invading women's uterus with their bills. Feminism is when Hania Moheed speaks up about being sexually assaulted by a mob in Tahir square, despite cultural norms that tell her, she, rather than her rapists, should be ashamed. b) I know about the injustice women face and I just felt this is bullshit and I'm not taking it and I'm going to say No, and I'm not only going to say No, I'm going to start a debate about why these kind of things matter.

**Table 5: Inclusive Pronouns in Feminist Speeches**

Name of Speakers	Extracts of Inclusive Pronouns from the Speeches
Adichie	<p><u>We</u> police girls, <u>we</u> praise girls for virginity, but <u>we</u> don't praise boys for virginity...</p> <p><u>We</u> teach girls shame. "Close your legs", "cover yourself", <u>we</u> make them feel as though by being born female they're already guilty of something. And so, girls grow up to be women who cannot see they have desire. They grow up to be women who cannot say what they truly think and they grow up and this is the worst thing <u>we</u> do to girls. They grow up to be women who have turned pretense into an art form.</p> <p>b) <u>We</u> should change laws that diminish women but changing the mindset is even more important. We should enact policy that supports women but changing cultural attitudes is even more important.</p>
Judd	<p>So,<u>we</u> are not here to be debunked. <u>We</u> are here to be respected; <u>we</u> are here to be nasty</p>
Obama	<p><u>We</u> as women have all the power <u>we</u> need to determine the outcome of this election. <u>We</u> have knowledge, <u>we</u> have a voice. <u>We</u> have a vote. And on November the 8<sup>th</sup>, <u>we</u> as women, <u>we</u> as Americans, <u>we</u> as decent human beings can come together and declare that enough is enough...</p>
Perez	<p>Patriarchy is the spaces <u>we</u> live in. It's the way <u>we</u> learn, it's the way we work, it's the way <u>we</u> live. Patriarchy is as much a part of us as the air <u>we</u> breathe. It's everywhere and it's everything right down to the way <u>we</u> speak.</p> <p>b) <u>We</u> are not really being represented... we need to not just treat the symptoms we also need to treat the cause and the cause of the injustices women face in the twenty first century is we are still chronically undervalued, our stories are not deemed important enough to make the national media or even local media... we are beaten and sexually violated.</p>

**Table 6. Content Adjectives in Feminist Speeches**

Name of Speakers	Extracts of Content Adjectives from the Speeches
<b>Adichie</b>	I used to look up to my grandmother who was a <u>brilliant, brilliant</u> woman, and wonder how she would have been if she had the same opportunity as men when she was growing up.
<b>Judd</b>	Yeah, I'm a <u>nasty</u> woman- a <u>loud, vulgar, proud</u> woman.
<b>Obama</b>	She is an <u>outstanding</u> mother. She has raised a <u>phenomenal young</u> woman. She's a <u>devoted</u> daughter who cared for her mother until her final days" ... and if any of us had raised a daughter like Hillary Clinton, we would be so proud.
<b>Perez</b>	A few weeks ago I stood outside the Home Office with some of the <u>bravest</u> women. b) There are a lot of <u>great</u> women to choose from.

**Table 7: Collocations in Feminist Speeches**

Name of Speakers	Extracts of Collocations from the Speeches
<b>Adichie</b>	"Grave injustice", "Horrible inhumanity", "Fairer World", "Savage Beings", "Happier women", "terrible choice" "Great disservice", "Fragile ego", "Sexual violence, bloodless logic, pregnancy penalty, slut shame, sexual harassment"
<b>Judd</b>	"Sexual assault, wage equality"
<b>Obama</b>	"Unthinkable obstacles", "Vicious language", "Hateful languages" "lewd conversations", "Sad election" , "sinking feeling" "Disturbing footnote" "vulgar words"
<b>Perez</b>	"Sexual violence, epidemic proportions, daily indignities, physical violence, domestic violence, sexual humiliation, drastic proportions" b) "Sexual assault, domestic incidents, abusive

	partners, male dominated parliament, male dominated media, domestic violence, epidermic proportions“
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### **Fem-Talk, A Variable for Enacting Change**

One of the goals of feminism is to crack the shell covering and restricting the behaviours of women in patriarchal societies and this includes their language use. Feminists linguistic practice deconstructs traditional gender roles for women through the use of the several features of language identified, one of them being the use of mundane expressions. Mundane expressions which are everyday earthly or vulgar language were purposefully used. Judd and Perez were more vocal in their use of these expressions, meanwhile traditionally, women are expected to use a reserved form of language. Women shrink from using words that have sexual underpinnings. It is considered distasteful for a woman to use sexual forms of language; they rather use euphemisms for such expressions. FemTalk on the other hand deconstructs these expectations. Feminists do not shy away from using words such as “pussy, vagina, sexy, desire, erection” as observed from the extracts above. Feminists have come to agree that there is nothing wrong or shameful about women using such words.

Rhetorical questions were used to challenge patriarchal manifestations of gender roles. Traditionally, women were conditioned to not speak in public places or even ask questions. Apostle Paul in the Bible admonished women to keep quiet in the church and if at all they had any question, they should ask their husbands at home. Feminists through the use of rhetorical questions try to raise the consciousness of women to question the premise behind gender expectations. These useful questions have opened the eyes of many to the fact that it is not programmed in the DNA of women to behave in certain ways. Like Adichie asked “today women in general are more likely to do the house work than men... but why is that?” such questions are geared towards the deconstruction of gender because the knowledge and skills of chores are learned; they don't come pre-installed in any woman's DNA.

Feminists use Content adjectives in description of women. Traditionally, women have been portrayed as people who just gossip and talk flippantly without meaningful contribution. The occupation reserved for them is child rearing and other docile positions. Hence, adjectives used in reference to women are empty adjectives such as “nice, divine” etc. FemTalk however, deconstructs this long standing belief by employing content adjectives in description of women.

Adjectives such as “strong, brave, brilliant” as we saw in the extracts portray women in active roles.

The use of inclusive pronouns were deployed to create “in group” status. Traditionally, women have been described as weak. They are called the “weaker vessel”. Hence, men charged themselves with the task of making decisions for women. With FemTalk however, feminist employ the inclusive pronoun “we” to identify women as a strong group of people who belong to a social class and who have influence. The inclusive pronoun “we” suggests that women are an organised group who have a goal and who have the power to achieve such goals. Hence, the deconstruction of the traditional view of women as weak. Adichie said “we teach girls shame, close your leg... as though by being born females they were already guilty of something” thereby letting women know that it’s in their power to change the way females are raised.

Feminists employ parallelism as a persuasive form of language. Traditionally, women’s speech were seen as monotonous, garrulous, and nothing but a chatter. FemTalk however deconstructs that ideology by employing a poetic form of language which is parallelism. Using repetitive patterns of sentences for the sake of emphasis and as a persuasive device did more to enforce the urgency of what they are advocating for.

Again, the use of direct speech. Women are known to use alot of hedges and indirect forms of expressions. This amounts to their invisibility in language use. The reason for this is because women were previously not allowed to have an opinion. FemTalk however deconstructs this gender biased role. Feminists employ the first person pronoun “I” in any talk in which they are engaged in other to make themselves present and visible and to commit themselves to their views and opinions.

Also, by using collocations, feminists proved that women can equally be norm developers. Women were previously norm enforcers, they simply use the language as prescribed by men who were the linguists and grammarians at the time. FemTalk, however, has proved that some women have moved from being norm enforcers to norm developers. Here, women use language in ways that capture their unique experiences and to expose the injustice of gender bias. Collocations such as “marital rape, savage beings, horrible inhumanity, vicious language, daily indignities, slut shame, gender bias, etc” are coined to describe and shed light on some of the abuses women go through. Things that were usually ignored and not talked about.

These linguistic features play important roles in the propagation of feminist ideologies. In the society today, the use of vulgar and banal words are no longer considered the exclusive repertoire of men's language. Women today can freely report 'rape' and 'groping' incidents without being ashamed or silenced. Women can use expressions such as "pussy, dick head, ass hole, sexy, hot, desire, vagina" without shrouding them or using euphemisms and more importantly is that they can use these expressions without being ashamed.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has established feminist language to be a sociolinguistics variable for enacting change in the society. Feminist language is a positive shift from women's language because while the stereotypical characteristics of women speech has done more to discriminate against them and keep them in subordinate positions, FemTalk is a liberating form of language that creates a symmetrical relationship between men and women. This work has shown that language and gender are social constructs. Gender roles and expectations are social constructs, hence it is not programmed in the DNA of women to use inadequate forms of language as this study has shown. Therefore through FemTalk women have the opportunity to use language in compelling forms to share their experiences and advocate for changes in the society just as feminist have done.

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