Gender Asymmetry in the Address System of the Basotho

By

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Abstract

Address forms are regarded as indicators of deference, politeness and markers of social distance. This paper examines the address forms and referring expressions used by the Basotho. These forms and expressions are examined with a view to looking at the factors determining their use. The paper is based mainly on semantic and pragmatic analysis with sociolinguistic/ethnographic overtones. It argues that the use of these terms is a result of cultural stereotypes which have seen men and women treated differently. The paper thus indicates that the terms are not merely linguistic but are indicators of the Basotho's social universe.

Introduction

Patterns of interaction vary from one speech community to another. It is this very phenomenon which sets off one speech community from the other since the very definition of a speech community implies that members share not only a language but also the knowledge of the speech conduct appropriate to the events which make up their daily existence (Holmes 2001). It is in the light of the significance of allegiance to a person's speech community that sociolinguists give attention to the study of address forms in various cultures (for example, Brown & Ford 1961, Fang & Heng 1983, Mehrota 1981, Dickey 1996, 1997).

Taking into account the fact that languages offer a repertoire of linguistic expressions to refer to an individual, this article focuses on how Basotho address and refer to people in different situations. Factors determining the choice of address terms and referring expressions will also be considered. An exploration of these various terms and expressions will help in understanding the culture of the Basotho people and also in knowing the reason why they behave the way they do in an encounter with others in different situations.

Address terms and referring expressions in other cultures

Studies on address and referring expressions have been carried out in different cultures. Though the norms of interaction are culture specific, the findings reveal that the terms are gendered and their meanings are a reflection of how various societies treat males and females differently, with males enjoying more prestige than females. The terms, being societal constructs, are not so much biased by themselves but they are laden with societal cultural practices.

In a study of Moroccan Arabic, Hachimi (2001) notes that women's socio- political and sex status are at the heart of the many asymmetries in addressing and referring to them. A woman acquires different identities throughout her life and these are reflected in the address terms and reference terms. In the pre-child bearing phase, a female is addressed as *bnt*, a term which is used to mark her virginity. Since it is imperative for a girl to preserve her virginity, it is a disgrace for a girl's family for her to be called *mra*, 'woman' which is a term used to address and refer to married women. As such, *mra* is never used to address or refer to a female child. For a baby boy, on the contrary, it is perfectly acceptable to address him by a term used for married men. Hachimi (2001) also explains that this form of address is not only acceptable for a young boy but is also required in order to boost his masculine pride and to prove his virility. Females, on the other hand, get status when they get married but only if they bear children, especially males. They are addressed and referred to by terms which show respect. They however lose this respect when they get old. For as Hachimi (2001:44) explains, old women "…having lost their

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asserts, i.e., their reproductive capacity, their physical attractiveness and with it their sexuality" are viewed and talked about in a very negative way. They are associated with the devil and destruction. They are referred to by abusive terms for which there are no masculine counterparts.

Another interesting study was conducted in a Turkish community. Braun (2001) points out that in Turkey males have a prime position in the society simply by virtue of their gender and the society has very clear conceptions of what should be the characteristics, activities and interests of males and females. It is for this gender-biased system that the referring terms, though structurally neutral, evoke gender distinctions. Thus, some terms are associated with females while others, especially those that have to do with prestige and power for instance, are associated with males. This is so because as Braun (2001: 289) explains, "The Turkish grammatical arrangement is characterized by a male dominance evident in almost all of the subsystems of the Turkish society (economy, labour, market, politics, law, religion). Men are simultaneously the privileged grammatical and the leading figures in these subsystems." In her study about gender association evoked by different terms for reference, Braun found that females were associated with low-level labels such as the secretary, cleaning person and salesperson while males were associated with categories such as *police officer, taxi driver* and *goldseller*.

English is no exception in the way it portrays gender bias. Apart from the obvious linguistic gender distinction, studies show that more terms that have positive connotations are associated with males while terms with negative connotations are mostly associated with females. For instance, in a study of words referring to men and women chosen from a dictionary and analysed in terms of the semantic criteria such as prestige and connotation, Nilsen (1977a) found that prestige terms referring to males were six times as frequent as feminine prestige words. She also observed that feminine words with negative connotation, for example, *callgirl, fishwife* and *old maid* outnumbered masculine words with negative connotation by 20% despite the fact that male words were predominant overall.

What these findings reveal is the fact that gender bias is very much rooted in the socio-cultural practices of a speech community and that the semantic connotations of reference terms have very little to do with the language itself. Males and females have different socio-cultural statuses and the expectations of the society about the behaviour or activities of men and women are embedded in the language system of the society. This is what Braun refers to as 'covert gender.'

Address terms and referring expressions in Sesotho

Semantically, address terms and referring expressions are similar in the sense that in each case they are used to show the relationship between a particular person and a linguistic expression to pick that person out or to identify him or her as a referent. However, basing myself on Dickey (1997), I propose to distinguish between the two such that terms of address will be limited to the address meaning of a word as determined by its usage as an attention -getting term or vocative. Thus, address terms will be taken to mean those terms a speaker uses in addressing, nominating or drawing the attention of a particular person to whatever he or she wants to talk about. In short, they are terms used in talking to another person. The reference terms, on the other hand, will be restricted to the non address contexts, that is, the referential meaning when the speaker talks about another person, whether that person is present or not.

This distinction is important in the sense that it points to the fact that address or reference terms are not just labels, but that the meanings contained in the terms are basically social as opposed to lexical. While it is true that there is a close relationship between the terms of address and terms of reference, it will also be a mistake to assume that the relationship is symmetrical such that in all contexts one can refer to another person by the same terms one uses to address that person. The terms are not always interchangeable because their social meaning is more important than their lexical meaning. Thus the choice of one term rather than the other, whether in addressing or referring, is not haphazard but has to do with the social structure or the communities of practice the person using them belongs to. For while it is true that language is a system of choice where a speaker has at his disposal various linguistic resources

from which to choose (as in choosing between active and passive construction), in addressing people or referring to them, what determines the choice is not linguistic factors but 'social or psychological, but most likely pragmatic or general cultural ones (Allerton, 1996:662).

Kinship terms

In the Basotho family, the normal practice is to address one another by kinship terms. The use of first name is strictly prohibited unless the person being addressed is either of the same age as the speaker or s/he is younger. Calling somebody older than the speaker by the first name is considered disrespectful. This way, a person's age not only determines how he or she should be addressed but also how he or she should be treated. Thus, while it is imperative that a person shows respect to any member of the family older than himself or herself, the older person is not so much obliged to show respect or politeness to someone younger than him or her. It is true that insults or impolite behaviour is not encouraged in the society, but the society seems to frown more if it is the younger person who insults people older than he or she is. There is much tolerance if this is done by the older person. For instance, if the siblings are fighting and start insulting each other, the older one will be reprimanded for mistreating the younger one and the younger one reprimanded for not showing respect to the older one by insulting him or her. Indeed, Basotho children grow up with the mentality that if one is older, one deserves some respect from the younger people. Very often when children are fighting, the younger calls the elder by the first name, or say for instance, *"Ha u ausi, u 'Makholu"* (You are not my elder sister (i.e. *ausi*), you are 'Makholu). By so saying, the younger child is not disputing the fact about the age difference, but the social meaning the term *ausi,* carries with it. Thus by using the first name rather than the normal or expected term *ausi,* the younger child actually means 'I refuse to respect you; and I will treat you as my equal.' This is so because in Sesotho, age is a very important sociolinguistic factor not only in addressing people but also in the other social endeavours.

The following are the Sesotho kinship terms and they are all used as vocatives. In talking to the referent who is a family member, the speaker usually uses the bare kinship title but for non-relatives, the kinship term is always followed by the first or last name to mark the social distance.

Table 1: Kinship terms used to address family members and society at large

Kinship term	English equivalent	Referent
'M'e	Mother	biological female parent; female old enough to be one's mother; mother-in-law; a lady deserving of a modicum of respect
Ntate	Father	biological male parent; male old enough to be one's father; husband; father-in-law; a gentleman deserving of respect
Nkhono	Grandmother	Mother/father's grandmother/mother; mother's elder sister; father's other wife, senior to my mother in marriage; female old enough to be one's grandmother
Ntate-moholo	Grandfather	Mother/father's grandfather/father; father's elder brother/ half brother; male old enough to be one's grandfather
Rangoane	Uncle	Father's younger brother
'mangoane	Aunt	Father's younger brother's wife; mother's younger sister; father's other wife, junior to one's mother in marriage
Malome	Uncle/ aunt	Mother's brother; Mother's brother's wife
Rakhali	Aunt/uncle	Father's sister; Father's sister's husband
Motsoala	Cousin	Mother's brother's child, Father's sister's child
Ausi	Sister	Elder sister/ elder half sister, female of the same generation but considerably older than speaker.
Abuti	brother	Elder brother/ half brother, husband, male of the same generation but considerably older than speaker.

The above table shows that Basotho, in addressing members of their families, are not simply using the terms as vocatives but also expressing their cultural practices. One of these social practices evident in the system of kinship terms is the gender bias. In Sesotho culture, a man is the head of the family and his decisions are always final. A woman is treated more or less like a child or even a chattel. She is actually a minor and does not have the right to property or child custody among other things. The husband is expected to provide everything for her. Based on such cultural practices, it is imperative that the wife shows a great deal of deference to the husband. Address forms are just one way the Basotho women show this respect and politeness to their husbands. As mentioned earlier, the use of first name is strictly prohibited unless one is talking to a younger person or one's equal. In the typical Basotho family, since a wife is a minor in relation to her husband, she is not supposed to address him by his first name, even if they are of the same age or in very rare cases, the wife is even older. The wife uses ***abuti,*** the respect term with which she addresses her elder brother. Alternatively, she addresses the husband by the term she uses to address her own father. Husbands on the other hand, do not have to address their wives by terms of respect, such as those with which they use to address their elder sisters or mothers. They simply address their wives by their first names, usually the names they acquired after marriage. This means therefore that husbands are socially senior to their wives regardless of the age differences there might be. Husbands are addressed as fathers because they are supposed to provide for their wives as breadwinners and heads of families thereby taking the responsibilities of their wives' biological fathers. This is so because when a girl marries, she becomes a child in her husband's home hence why she will address her father and mother-in-law by the terms she uses to address her own parents.

From the meanings attached to the Sesotho kinship terms, it can also be observed that the non-relatives can also be addressed as if they were a speaker's relatives (for instance, **'m'e, ntate, ausi** and **abuti**). The use of the kinship terms to non-kin is an indication that language cannot be divorced from culture. Where these terms are used to non-kin, they are markers of respect for the person being talked to. It is important to highlight that respect, especially to older people, is one of the most important aspects of the Basotho as a people.

Category labels

Insults or derogatory terms in Sesotho are also worth looking at because they are mostly targeted at females. The terms are marked terms of address in the sense that though they are targeted at a particular individual as in name-calling, they are not attention getting devices like the kinship terms discussed in the previous section. In this article, they are discussed as referring expressions in the sense proposed by Dickey (1997). Their function is primarily to characterize or evaluate their referents. In this section, the referring expressions that are used for boys and girls who engage in premarital sex and their consequent treatment by the society will be examined. Secondly, a discussion on how childbearing or inability of a couple to have a child affects the treatment and the labelling of the husband and wife will be made. Lastly, how societal expectations about the positions of each gender are reflected in the labelling of women and men will be discussed.

Although pre-marital sex is forbidden in Sesotho culture, it is imperative for a girl to preserve her virginity, as it is a disgrace for her to be called **mosali** (woman), which is a term used to refer to women. A girl who is not married and is thought to have had sex is not only referred to as **mosali**, but is also labeled *letekatse*, a whore. This is why a girl who has a child out of wedlock is usually despised by the community, including her own family. She is a disgrace to her family and she will be reminded of this throughout her life as the child she bears will be given a demeaning name to show that its birth was unacceptable (Samson-akpan and Mokhathi- Mbhele, 2002; Matee 2006). Indeed, in the traditional Basotho community, when a boy has impregnated a girl, only the girl carries the blame and she is regarded as worthless. **"O senyehile** (she is worthless)," Basotho would say. The boy is said to have made her worthless, not the other way round. Although both the boy and the girl had lost their virginity in an act they had both presumably consented to, the boy is thought of as the more active, but blameless participant, capable of making the girl worthless.

With regard to the institution of marriage, childbearing is a very important aspect in the society and a woman who does not bear children is despised both by her husband and the rest of the society, including the womenfolk. She is barred from such social events as *mokete oa pitiki,* a feast to mark the social birth of a Mosotho child. In this feast, " participants [that is, dancers] …are exclusively women of childbearing age who have given birth to at least one child…and women who have not borne children are not allowed" (Moitse1994: 86-7). This is so because in Sesotho, the basic role of a woman is to bear children. A typical Mosotho woman is either pregnant or nursing and she alternates between these two phases until menopause. She has a sense of pride and fulfilment of her role by producing as many children as possible for her husband. If a couple cannot have children, only the wife is to blame. She is referred to by demeaning terms, the most common being **nyopa** which translates into 'barren woman'. Of course there is no equivalent for a male simply because men always produce children, it is strongly believed. This explains why the use of teknonyms, a special category of names of the construct characterised by the combination of father or mother plus the personal name of a child as in **'m'e oa Kholu** (mother of Kholu), is very popular among the Basotho women. The use of teknonym boosts a woman's status in the society because it is a marker that she is indeed a real woman who has a child. It is not surprising therefore that wives normally use teknonyms to refer to their husbands as a way to brag about their status as both wives and mothers.These are very important aspects in being a Mosotho woman.

Another example of gender bias in the Sesotho referring expressions concerns people involved in

an illicit love affair. A woman found or believed to be having an affair outside marriage is referred to by the terms used in talking about prostitutes, and again, there is no concept of a male prostitute in Sesotho. The woman is called *seotsoa, letekatse,* or *lehure*, all of which mean a slut. The man with whom she is involved is not labeled negatively. The man would rather be labelled positively as *poho,* a bull, to show that just like a bull he has no reason to stick to one partner. To add to this, there is a saying in Sesotho that *monna ke mokopu o'a nama, mosali ke k'habeche o'a ipopa* (loosely translated as "a man is a pumpkin plant, he spreads/runs; a woman is a head of a cabbage, she is intact/composed). This clearly indicates that women and men are treated differently in the Basotho society and women are seen as inferior to men.

Apart from the insults which are explicitly biased in the sense that there are no masculine equivalents, neutral terms which designate people's positions are socially gendered in the sense that certain activities or occupations are associated with males and others with females. For instance, the fact that men are associated with defence and status, when words such as *lekostabole* 'constable', *lesole* 'soldier', *lepolesa* 'police officer' and *ngaka* 'medical doctor' are mentioned, one thinks of them as identifying a male referent. In fact, it is very common to specify the sex especially when referring to females hence *lekosetabole la mosali* 'woman constable', *lesole la mosali* 'woman soldier' and *lepolesa la mosali* 'policewoman'. These examples show that males are often associated with power and status and women who join male activities in a way seem to be intruding the males' territory. This is why, one has to make it explicit if reference is made to a female. In other domains where activities are female oriented, the neutral terms evoke female referents as in *nese* 'nurse' or *mongoli* 'secretary'.

Conclusion

This article has tried to show that age seems to be an overriding factor in the use of address terms among the Basotho. This differs from American or English use of address terms wherein status is the deciding factor as recorded by Ervin-Tripp (1972). Within families, the main divisions in usage follow age. This explains why a person who is addressed by a kinship term may not be addressed by the first name. Another thing that emerges in the Sesotho address system is that of gender bias where women address men in terms of respect and the men do not reciprocate. Besides, the fact that category labels which have negative connotations or lower status are applied mostly to women is yet another proof of the gender asymmetry in the Sesotho culture.

To conclude, it must be observed that it is almost impossible to divorce language from culture because language is neutral by itself; it is just a tool for a society's worldview. Language, as a socially constructed and instituted phenomenon, is neutral in itself; it is only the people who are biased. If people talk about language reform they should look at it as part of social reform. For as Graddol and Swan (1989:110, quoted in Ehrlick & King (1998:165) rightly say of neutral terms, 'The existence of unmarked expressions in the language does not mean that these will be used and interpreted in a neutral way.' It really does not make much sense or difference if women are addressed by neutral terms while at the same time the same terms evoke gendered mental images and women are still treated differently from men. Since address terms are not just labels but content laden with societal perspectives, namely gender asymmetry, what women should fight for is the societal reform in terms of values and perspective. If they succeed to gain gender equality, then language neutrality in the sense of eradicating gendered conceptions will be a natural process.

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