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WOMEN'S LANGUAGE OR POWERLESS LANGUAGE: INSIGHTS FROM YORUBA[1]

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Abstract
In the literature on language and gender, women have been found to use certain varieties more than men. Such varieties have been regarded as "women's language" as can be seen for example in Lakoff (1973). In this paper, I examine the use of Yoruba honorific pronouns in the movie, *Ẹfúnsetán Aniwura* (Ogunsola, Kelani, and Ísọ̀lá, 2005), and establish that Yoruba women use honorific pronouns more than men. However, I follow O'Bar and Atkins (1980) and Wetzel (1988) and argue that the use of honorific pronouns in Yoruba is a feature of powerless language rather than that of women's language. I suggest that the term "women's language" should be reserved for language varieties that have been documented to be exclusively used by women. I suggest that a distinction should be made between "powerless language" that women are made to use more and "women's language" that is made powerless. This allows us to ask fundamental questions about the relations between power, language, and gender and between language evolution and gender differentiation.

Keywords: women's language, powerless language, honorific pronouns, Yoruba

Àṣamọ̀
Nínú iṣẹ́ ìwadǐ ìmọ̀ ìjìnlẹ̀ nípa èdè àti ọ̀rọ̀ akọ-sábo, àwọn onímọ̀ ìjìnlẹ̀ ti ṣe àwárí rẹ̀ pé àwọn obìnrin máa ń lo àwọn ìsọwọ́sọ̀rọ̀ kan ju àwọn ọkùnrin lọ. Irúfẹ́ àwọn ìsọwọ́sọ̀rọ̀ yí ni àwọn onímọ̀ ìjìnlẹ̀ bíi Lakoff (1973) pè ni "èdè àwọn obìnrin". Nínú ìwadǐ ìmọ̀ ìjìnlẹ̀ yí, mo ṣe ìwadǐ ìsọwọ́lò àwọn ọ̀rọ̀ arọ́pò orúkọ ajẹmọ-ọ̀wọ̀ nínú eré àgbéléwò *Ẹfúnsetán Aniwura* (Ogunsola, Kelani, àti Ísọ̀lá, 2005). Mo fi hàn pé àwọn obìnrin ń lo àwọn ọ̀rọ̀ arọ́pò orúkọ ajẹmọ́-ọ̀wọ̀ ju àwọn okùnrin lọ. Sùgbọ́n, mo tẹ̀lé O'Bar àti Atkins (1980) àti Wetzel (1988) láti ṣe atótónu pé lílo ọ̀rọ̀ arọ́pò orúkọ ajẹmọ́-ọ̀wọ̀ jẹ́ àbùdá "èdè ọ̀lẹ" àti pé kìí ṣe àbùdá "èdè obìnrin". Mo dábǎ pé ohun tí ó yẹ kí á maá fi ọ̀rọ̀ ìjìnlẹ̀ "èdè obìnrin" perí ni ìsọwọ́lò èdè tí ó jẹ́ pé àwọn obìnrin nìkan ni ìwadǐ ti fi hàn pé wọ́n ń lòó. Mo dábǎ pé ó yé kí ìyàtọ̀ ó wà láàrin "èdè ọ̀lẹ" tó jẹ́ pé àwọn obìnrin ni wọn ń lòó jù àti "èdè obìnri" tí àwùjọ sọ di ọ̀lẹ. Èyí fún wa ní àǹfààní láti bèèrè àwọn ìbéèrè ìpìlẹ̀ tó níí se pẹ̀lú àjọṣepọ̀ láàrin agbára, èdè, àti ọrọ akọ-sábo àti ìbáṣepọ̀ láàrin ìgbèrúyípadà èdè àti ìṣèyàtọ̀ alákọ-sábo.

Ọ̀rọ̀ gbòógì: èdè obìnrin, èdè ọ̀lẹ, ọ̀rọ̀ arọ́pò orúkọ ajẹmọ́-ọ̀wọ̀, Yorùbǎ

1. Introduction

In the literature on language and gender, men and women have been found to use different speech varieties. Women have been found to use certain speech varieties more than men, and for this reason, such varieties are said to constitute the concept of "women's language" (see, for example, Lakoff 1973 and the various articles compiled in Wodak 1997). The term "women's language" then relies on quantitative differentiation rather than exclusive usage. Because the speech varieties that have been taken to be women's language index powerlessness, researchers such as O'Bar and Atkins (1980) and Wetzel (1988) have suggested instead that these varieties be called "powerless languages" which women use more because society constantly places them lower on socially constructed hierarchies.

In this paper, I investigate the use of honorific pronouns in Yoruba within the movie, *Ẹfúnsetán Aniwura* (retrieved from Ogunsola, Kelani, and Ísọ̀lá, 2005), and show that women are forced to use more honorific pronouns than men. If one were to follow the tradition in the study of language and gender (going back to Lakoff 1973) that labels a variety as women's language based on quantitative differentiation, one might be tempted to categorize the use of honorific pronouns as a feature of women's language in Yoruba. However, I argue that in every conversation, symmetric and asymmetric use of Yoruba pronouns is determined by socially defined hierarchies and situational power rather than the gender of participants. For this reason, I argue that the use of honorific pronouns is a feature of the powerless language in Yoruba. In what follows, I suggest

[1] I am grateful to Nathalie Dajko for her comments on the earliest version of this paper. Thanks also to the two anonymous reviewers whose comments and suggestions have helped to improve the content and presentation of the paper. I take responsibility for the remaining shortcomings.

that the term "women's language" should be reserved for language varieties that have been documented to be exclusively used by women.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides some background on gender patterns in language, "women's language" versus "powerless language", and cross-linguistic and cross-cultural perspectives on gender patterns in language. In Section 3, I describe the methodology adopted in the paper, while Section 4 provides analyses of excerpts taken from the movie. There is a brief discussion of the findings in Section 5. Section 6 concludes the paper with a summary.

2. Background

In this section, I review the concept of "women's language" and distinguish it from the concept of "powerless language". I suggest that the term "women's language" should be reserved for varieties that are exclusively used by women.

2.1. Women's language or powerless language

The general and popular assumption in the study of language and gender is that language varieties are differentiated by the factor of gender. From Jespersen (1922) to Lakoff (1973), the general belief is that men and women do in fact speak or use language differently. Lakoff (1973) establishes what people now refer to as "women's language". Underlying her framework is the assumption that women use a variety of language that is powerless while men use a variety that is powerful; men are, thus, said to dominate women in conversations. Because of these two dimensions to her framework, it is often simultaneously taken as representing the 'deficit' approach—because it indirectly assumes that women use an inferior language variety just as it is claimed in Jespersen (1922)—and as representing the 'dominance' approach. But it is with the dominance approach that her framework is often associated. A third approach, the 'difference' approach, is represented more prominently in the work of Tannen (e.g., Tannen, 1994) who, building on the framework of Gumperz (1982) and following in the tradition of Maltz and Borker (1982), claims that the differences observed in the language of men and women are simply differences having less to do with power dynamics but more to do with socialization. The core aspect of her proposal is that men and women are socialized to talk differently. In other words, men and women grow up and belong to different sub-cultures. Tannen claims that women's and men's languages are both equally valid and have their respective internal logic.

What is common to these three research approaches is that they assume that there is such a thing as women's language. For the deficit approach, this women's language is deficient or defective; for the dominance approach, it is a powerless language; while for the difference approach, it is equally valid as the variety used by men. The questions then are: (1) What is a women's language? (2) Is it the same cross-linguistically? and (3) Why is a variety of language "women's language"? To address the first question, we only need a glance at the literature on language and gender. What most researchers take as women's language are linguistic variables that men also use. That is, they are features that are not exclusive to women. For example, Lakoff (1973) lists features such as *question tag* (e.g., *John is here, isn't he?*) and *compound requests* (e.g., *Won't you please close the door?*) as features of women's language in English. These are features not exclusively used by women. These are different from phonetic features like voice quality that Gradol and Swan (1989) observe are determined by physiology and biology. "Women's language" is thus based on quantity and tendency rather than on exclusive usage.

Women have been found to exhibit different linguistic behaviors than men in a number of quantitative and qualitative studies. To take just a few examples, West (1984), based on quantitative results, claims that women (female doctors) interrupt less than men even when in positions of power; Eisikovits (2011) shows, also based on quantitative data, that girls decrease their use of stigmatized forms (non-standard past tense forms, multiple negations, and invariable *don't*) as they grow old, compared to boys, confirming Labov's (1990) popular Principle I, which assume that women use less stigmatized forms than men in stable sociolinguistic stratification;

while Swann (1989) reports data that suggest that female students contribute less in the classrooms she studied while male students seem to participate more. The concept "women's language" thus relies on how much of a feature woman are using rather than whether a feature is *only* used by women.

This leads us to the second question about whether these linguistic features and behaviors ascribed to women are cross-linguistic or cross-cultural. Some research from other cultures (even within English, cf. Hughes 1992) has shown both qualitatively and quantitatively that some of the features ascribed to women do not carry over to women in those cultures. A good example is Wetzel's (1988) qualitative work that demonstrates that the patterns of language behavior documented for women in the West such as the use of positive minimal responses, the use of utterances that demand responses, report (indirect) accusations, etc. are the Japanese norms of speech behavior irrespective of gender. De Klerk (1992) also gives a quantitative report about girls in South Africa who are found to be aware of derogatory terms/curse words, contrary to the general assumption that women use less of this feature. Certainly, more works from other cultures will shed more light on the intersection of language, gender, and power. In the discussion that follows, I provide yet another account of male/female speech differences in a language, Yoruba, where these ideas have not been explored in as much detail as English.

To answer the third (and last) question posed above about why certain linguistic forms and behaviors are regarded as being peculiar to women, we only need to point to the fact that it is the socially defined norms that constantly put women in a position where they have to use these forms or exhibit these linguistic behaviors. This suggests that the forms or behaviors are not inherent to women. This is what studies like O'Barr and Atkins (1980), Wetzel (1988), and Swann (1989) have shown. O'Bar and Atkins (1980) argue that rather than calling a set of features women's language we should refer to the set as a powerless language that people from any sex or gender may exhibit at any given point in an interaction. O'Bar and Atkins' (1980) argument stems from the fact that most of the features that have been ascribed to women, such as *less interruptions, question tags, compound requests, hedges* (e.g., *kind of, sort of, etc.*), and *disclaimers* (e.g., *I may be wrong but...*) (Lakoff 1973, Grob et al. 1997, etc.), are linguistic devices that downgrade the speaker and elevate the addressee. A powerless language then can be defined as a speech style that downgrades the speaker while elevating the addressee as a way to acknowledge the addressee's superiority or to be polite to them. Wetzel (1988) following O'Bar and Atkins (1980), also suggests that the idea of women's language is problematic on the ground that it does not allow for cultural variation since women's language in the Western sense is the Japanese norm. Swann (1989) makes a similar point that, even though boys participated more than girls in the classes she studied, it would be wrong to conclude that boys dominated girls without paying attention to the implicit culture (teachers' attention being more towards boys than towards girls), i.e., the context that promotes the gender imbalance.

To sum it up, I have posed three questions to help us understand what has been traditionally referred to as "women's language". In answering the first question about what "women's language" is, we discover that what has been taken to be women's language are varieties that men also use, which, in English, are characterized by certain features such as *hedges*, *question tags*, *statement questions*, *compound requests*, *interruptions,* and *disclaimers*. In examining the second question about whether this "women's language" is the same cross-linguistically, we found that features of "women's language" do not carry over to every language. In other words, what has been termed "women's language" is not a variety that is characterized by the same set of features in every language. Answers to the third question about why certain varieties are regarded as women's language also reveal that these varieties are said to be women's language because women were found to use more of the features that characterize the varieties. For example, in English, women are said to interrupt less than men, they are said to use more hedges than men, etc. Because these features index powerlessness, O'Bar and Atkins (1980) and Wetzel (1988) suggest that they should be regarded as "powerless language" rather than "women's language". In the next sub-

section, I follow this line of thinking and argue further that the term "women's language" should be reserved for language varieties that have been documented to be exclusively used by women.

2.2. "Women's language" redefined

From the discussions above, we have seen that the varieties taken to be women's language are varieties that men also use and that they are only taken to be women's language because women are said to use more of them. Because men and women use these varieties and because the varieties index powerlessness, it appears to be on the right track to suggest that they should be regarded as "powerless language" in line with O'Bar and Atkins (1980) and Wetzel (1988). It also seems right to think that the term "women's language" should be reserved for language varieties that have been documented to be used exclusively by women.

Such exclusive variety has been documented by Herbert (1990) for Nguni wives in South Africa. According to Herbert (1990), *isihlonipho sebafazi* (wives' avoidance language) is an avoidance speech variety that is used exclusively by married women, where women avoid the names of their affinal kins as well as the phonological strings that occur in those names. *Isihlonipho sebafazi* is a true women's language in so far as it is a speech variety exclusively used by Nguni women. The power dynamic that produced this variety can only be explored within the socio-political structures in which it operates. This is a question that is clearly orthogonal to the present discussion.

Another documented case of a true "women's language" is the female language documented among the Ubang people in the state of Cross Rivers in Nigeria. According to Blench (2001), Undie (2007), Adegoke (2018), and other accounts, Ubang men and women maintain two distinct speech varieties. The major point of departure that has been documented for these varieties is the lexicon. A large number of lexemes exist in the language with both male and female forms that are not phonologically or morphologically connected. The Ubang people themselves distinguish between male language and female language, and it is taboo for a mature woman to speak the male language, even though a man is permitted to speak the women's language (Channels Television, 2013). The Ubang female speech variety, which is devoid of male speech forms, is a true "women's language" that is made powerless by a patriarchal system that determines that all speech forms can be used by men but that women cannot use the male speech variety. True "women's languages" have been documented for such other languages as Japanese, Koasati, Bengali, Carib, and Chiquitano (see Fromkin et al. 2014: 299-300).

Such exclusive varieties as those described above can thus be regarded as true "women's languages" that are made powerless by patriarchal systems, and they should be distinguished from powerless varieties that patriarchal systems make women use more. In the discussions that follow, I argue that, although Yoruba women, by virtue of their position within a patriarchal system, are forced to use more honorific pronouns than men, the use of honorific pronouns is a feature of powerless Yoruba speech that persons from any gender may use based primarily on socially defined hierarchies and situational power that shifts from conversation to conversation and even within a single conversation.

3. Methodology

The data for this study are taken from the movie, *Ẹfúnsetán Aniwura*[2] (retrieved from Ogunsola, Kelani, and Íṣọ̀lá, 2005), which was produced by Aloy Productions and released in

[2] A reviewer queries whether a movie is enough as a data source and if artistic creations can be a reliable source of data for linguistics analyses. Asking these questions seems to suggest a view of literary works as being produced in cultural and linguistic vacuum. To the contrary, works of arts, movies included, do indeed reflect the culture and language behavior of the people they portray. For this reason, they can be a source of data for linguistic analyses which can further be investigated in naturally occurring speech forms. The reason why choosing a movie for this analysis is appropriate is that getting the same kind of symmetry and asymmetry in pronoun usage in naturally occurring speech

2005. The movie is based on a historical figure by the same name. She was one of the most powerful women in the whole of Yoruba land in the 19th century. She held the position of *Iyalode Ibadan* (lit: woman.in.outside of Ibadan), a powerful chieftaincy position in the city of Ibadan, between 1867 and 1874. This position afforded her a seat in the palace and the privilege to make contributions like other male chiefs during deliberations with the king of Ibadan. She was powerful not only politically but also economically. She had a great deal of wealth and lots of slaves. Her wealth had a direct impact on the economy as well as the politics of Ibadan. During the period she was the *Iyalode*, Ibadan frequently waged war on neighboring communities and she supplied a large amount of resources to the palace for these wars. She was thus one of the political and economic backbones of Ibadan at the time.

The movie, which reflects a version of the historical accounts about Ẹfúnsetán, portrays her in the opening scenes as a powerful woman who is kind to those around her. She uses her wealth to help people around and under her. Everything changes, however, when her only child, Toyosi, dies during childbirth. She becomes harsh on everyone around her. She forbids her slaves from having sex or having children. One of her female slaves gets pregnant and this comes to her notice. She orders that the slave be killed. The slave is killed, and the Ibadan people become angry, demanding that Ẹfúnsetán be brought to justice. This forces the king, *Ààrẹ* ('war general') *Latoosa*, who himself is a warlord, to mobilize the people and confront Ẹfúnsetán at her house in the Yoruba combative style which is based on spiritual power. Ẹfúnsetán, realizing that she is being overpowered by the king, commits suicide. A sub-plot of the movie revolves around slaves challenging Ẹfúnsetán's authority and the king's authority when they are not present. There are also instances where both of them are challenged face-to-face by a person of lower status. I chose this movie because it displays the intersections between gender and power and demonstrates how gender plays less role in determining who uses a powerful language and who uses a powerless language, and how, rather, what determines which variant is used in an interaction are the socially defined status-relations between interlocutors and circumstances surrounding each conversation.

I watched the movie and transcribed portions of it containing features in Yoruba that can be regarded as indicative of powerful or powerless language. These include the use of honorific (plural) pronouns, bald directives, direct insults, expressions of hierarchical elevation (expressions that put the speaker down and the addressee up), formulaic expressions (like *kara o le o* 'may your body be energetic'). However, I focus only on the use of honorific pronouns in this paper[3]. In the section that follows, the relevant transcribed portions are presented in the form of examples with interlinear glossing and translation. These examples are introduced in the form of 'X (speaker) to Y (addressee) [about Z (third party)]- Minute: Second', where 'Minutes: Second' indicates the exact point where the expression can be found in the timeline of the movie.

4. Analysis

The Yoruba society is a hierarchical society that defines expressly the hierarchical relations among people of different categories. To take a few examples, consider the following:

(1) Parents are higher in status than their children
(2) Older siblings are higher in status than their younger siblings
(3) Older people are higher in status than younger people

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for the same set of people will require the ethnographic method of participant observation which will take months if not years of data collection. Meanwhile, the movie provides a means for which to begin to interrogate the connection between pronoun use and power dynamics. Besides, I am a Yoruba person who has witnessed (though not documented) these a/symmetries in different interactions since I was a child. Based on this, I think the use of the movie is justified in so far as this paper is in the right position to inspire further research that may look at this issue in naturally occurring speech.

[3] A reviewer thinks that "it would be good to study the range of Yoruba honorific terms across various domains ranging from the historical to the contemporary and considering factors such as social networks, gender, class, and age amongst such other considerations". The reviewer is suggesting an entirely different paper. I hope that the current paper will help inspire the broader research that is being suggested here.

(4) People in a position of authority are higher in status than those under them
(5) Husbands are higher in status than their wives
(6) Husband's younger siblings, nieces, nephews, cousins, and other relatives are higher in status than the wife if they were born before the wife was married.
(7) Old (senior) wives are higher in status than new wives, whether or not they have the same husband.

All these types of hierarchical relations have the same form: A person *x* is higher in status than a person *y*. Direct correlates of these hierarchical relations can be found in the language. As mentioned in the previous section, I focus only on one of these: the use of honorific pronouns. Honorific pronouns are plural pronouns used to refer to a single individual to acknowledge their superiority or to be polite to them. As a result, the Yoruba tradition requires that children refer to their parents in their (parents') presence or absence with plural pronouns. For instance, a child dare not use singular pronouns to refer to their mother or father. That will be a first-degree taboo. In general, societal expectations are that use of pronouns in reference to people is to be guided by the social hierarchies in (1) through (7). As such, *y*, as defined above, has to use plural (honorific) pronouns (or what Brown and Gilman (1960) call *V*(*ous*)) to refer to *x* while *y* gets singular pronouns (Brown and Gilman's *T*(u)). Based on this, it can be concluded that giving T and receiving V is a feature of "powerful language" in Yoruba while giving V and receiving T can be said to be a feature of "powerless language" in the language.

An important point to observe here, however, is that all else being equal, the hierarchies in (1-7) force women to use more honorific pronouns than men. However, when these hierarchies are challenged in a given interaction, we often have symmetric use of the pronouns. One other thing to consider before proceeding is that the hierarchies could conflate (and they do most of the time) or conflict in a given interaction. When conflation happens, that is for example when *x* is both older than and is the boss of *y*, there is no confusion for *y*: *y* uses V (plural pronouns) to refer to *x*. However, when conflict occurs, say *x* is older than *y* but *y* is the boss of *x*, this results in negotiations in the linguistic choices made. In what follows, I consider (i) instances where some of the hierarchies determine the use of honorific pronouns (in other words, interactions proceed with appropriate use of pronouns as the social hierarchies in (1) through (7) demand) and (ii) instances where a change in hierarchical relation occurs or when the status of a person occupying a higher position is challenged—this is what Oyetade (1995) refers to as situational constraint—noting in each case instances of conflation and instances of conflict. I examine the former first.

The movie contains lots of instances where we find the use of pronouns correlating perfectly with the hierarchical relations between the participants. I examine only a few of them here. Consider (8):

(8) a. Tóóyọ̀sí to Ẹfúnsetán (her mother) [9:34]

Ìyá	**mi**	***ẹ***	**káàbọ̀**
Mother	1SG	***2PL***	ku.welcome

'You are welcome, my mother.'

b. Ẹfúnsetán to Tóóyọ̀sí (her daughter) [9:37]

Bóo	**ní**	**ti**	**ń**	**se**	***ọ́***
How	FOC	PFV	PROG	do	***2SG***

'How are you feeling?'

We see here that the hierarchy in (1) determines who uses what kind of pronoun. Tóóyọ̀sí is the daughter and so has to use the honorific pronoun ẹ to refer to her mother, Ẹfúnsetán, who, being in a position of power, uses a singular pronoun that indicates subordination. There is conflation here: Ẹfúnsetán is both a parent and the older in this interaction. She, therefore, enjoys two forms

of superiority in this conversation. This conflation ensures perfect adherence to asymmetry in the use of pronouns. Consider now the husband-wife interaction in (9).

(9) a. Àjílé to her husband [16:30]

Ẹẹ̀	**sí**	**ńlé**	**nígbà**	**tí**	**n**	**ó**	**bóóde**
2PL.NEG	be.present	at.home	at.time	that	1SG	FUT	go.out

‘You were not around when I was going out.’

b. Àjílé’s husband to her [16:32]

Kò	**yẹ**	**k*ó***	**dúró**	**dè**	**mí**	**kó**	**tó**
NEG	be.right	that.***2SG***	wait	for	1SG	that.3SG	before
dipé	***ọ***	**lọ**					
become.that	***2SG***	go					

‘Are you not supposed to wait for me before you go.’

The hierarchy in (5) also plays out nicely, determining who is to use singular pronouns and who should use the plural (honorific) pronouns. Àjílé’s husband exercises the superiority accorded him by the socially constructed hierarchy in (5) by using a singular pronoun to refer to her, while Àjílé, accepting the lower status the hierarchy puts her, uses an honorific pronoun in return. The asymmetry of power captured in the hierarchy in (4) also plays out in the following exchanges.

(10) a. Ààre Látóòsà (the king) to Séríkí (one of the chiefs) [54:41]

Séríkí	***ọ***	**lọ́rọ̀ọ́sọ?**
Séríkí	***2SG***	have.word.say

‘Séríkí, you have something to say?’

b. Séríkí (one of the chiefs) to Ààre Látóòsà (the king) [54:44]

Mo	**kíi**	***yín***	**o**	**bàbá**	**wa**
1SG	greet	***2PL***	O	father	1PL

‘I greet you, our father.’

(11) a. Àjílé to Ẹfúnsetán (her friend) [18:40]

Ẹ	**jókǒ**	**báyìí**
2PL	sit	like.this

‘Sit here’

b. Ẹfúnsetán to Àjílé (her friend) [19:25]

Kúò	**lójú**	**ọ̀nà**	**b*ó*ò**	**bá**	**mọhun**	**t*ó*o**	**wí**
Leave	in.eye	way	if.***2SG***.NEG	SBJ	know.thing	that.***2SG***.FUT	say

‘Get out of my way if you don’t know what to say.’

In (10a), the king, Ààrẹ, uses the singular form to refer to one of his chiefs; in (10b) the chief, Séríkí, replies with a plural honorific pronoun. This shows the hierarchy between the two men. In this case, age does not matter, nor does any of the other factors implicated in (1) to (7). Thus, even if there is hierarchical conflict, this position of authority as a defining factor for the hierarchy in (4) supersedes any other factor. To be sure, to refer to the present king (Ooni) of Ife, one of the most prominent Yoruba cities in Nigeria, the chiefs in his palace dare not use singular pronouns even though he is far younger than most of them. The person in a position of authority subordinates people under him by using singular pronouns (the *T* forms); those under him, the chiefs, use plural pronouns (the *V* forms) to acknowledge his authority. This is the same kind of

pattern we see in (11). Àjílé and Ẹfúnsetán are close friends in the movie. One might think that their friendship should create some level of symmetry between them. While this might be so, it seems that the power asymmetry between them supersedes any other form of relationship. Ẹfúnsetán is a politically and economically powerful woman; Àjílé is not. She is just an 'ordinary' housewife. This asymmetry in hierarchical status is reflected in their pronoun use as we see in (11): Àjílé uses plural pronouns to refer to Ẹfúnsetán while Ẹfúnsetán uses singular pronouns to refer to her.

Examples (8) through (11) demonstrate instances where the socially defined hierarchies successfully predict who gets to use singular pronouns to refer to people and who has to use plural (honorific) pronouns. Let us now turn to cases where these hierarchies are challenged (or circumstances weaken the hierarchies) and see how this is reflected in pronoun choices.

(12) a. Fọ̀kọ̀ (one of the chiefs) to Ààrẹ (the king) [13:30]

Ààrẹ	**kí**	**ni**	**mo**	**se**	**fún**	***ọ***	**gan-an?**
Ààrẹ	what	FOC	1SG	do	for	***2SG***	exactly

'Àarẹ̀, what exactly did I do to you?'

b. Ààrẹ to the chiefs about Fọ̀kọ̀ (the chief who disrespected him) [15:13]

Ẹ	**lọ**	**rèé**	**jẹ**	**ilé**	***ẹ̀***	**run!**
2PL	go	to	eat	house	***3SG***	destroy

'Go and destroy his house.'

(13) a. Àjílé to Ẹfúnsetán [01:05:25]

***Ø*Tètè**	**Ømáa**	**wá**	**sá**	**àsálà**	**fún**	**ẹ̀mí**	**rẹ**
***2SG*.quickly**	**2SG**.PROG	come	run	run.survive	for	life	**2SG**

'Flee at once for your life.'

b. Ẹfúnsetán to Àjílé [01:05:43]

***Ø*Woo**	***Ø*máa**	**re**	**ilé**	**rẹ!**
***2SG*.Look**	***2SG*.PROG**	go	house	**2SG**

'Now proceed to go to your house!'

In (12a), Fọ̀kọ̀, one of the chiefs, is angry at the king and has come to the palace to challenge the authority of the king to order the destruction of his farm. Because he challenges the king's authority, he makes use of a singular pronoun to refer to him. This move strips the king off of the privileges that tradition accords him and places him on the same level (on all socially constructed hierarchies) as Fọ̀kọ̀. This instance reflects how even a superseding hierarchy is situationally defined rather than something that must carry over to every single interaction. Carson (1997: 149) has rightly observed that discourse context and perceived power of the addressee shape linguistic outcomes in an interaction. Therefore, each situation defines the power hierarchy between interlocutors. Fọ̀kọ̀ storms out of the palace and the king, claiming that Fọ̀kọ̀ has insulted the whole city of Ibadan, orders the other chiefs to issue a command to the army to destroy Fọ̀kọ̀'s house (12b). This is a situation where the hierarchy between two men is challenged. In (13), we have a situation where the hierarchy is weakened between two women, resulting in symmetric use of singular pronouns. Àjílé, Ẹfúnsetán's friend, comes to inform her that she is in trouble and should flee her house before the angry mob led by the king gets to her house. In (13a), we see that Àjílé uses singular pronouns to refer to Ẹfúnsetán. In a normal situation, she dare not use singular pronouns, but in this situation, by using singular pronouns, Àjílé seems to signal that they are both on the same hierarchy (a move which may have an underlying intent of solidarity and loyalty): Ẹfúnsetán, even though powerful, is in danger of being killed by a mob; Àjílé is not. Ẹfúnsetán's status is being called into question and she is about to be stripped off of this status. Àjílé, sensing this, brings Ẹfúnsetán on the same hierarchy as herself, indicating that they are both women without power in this situation. Ẹfúnsetán gets angry because her authority is being

challenged not only by the people but also by her close friend. In (13b) she angrily asks Àjílé to leave her house, using singular pronouns. What makes this interesting is that Àjílé has used plural (honorific) pronouns to refer to Ẹfúnsetán in all other scenes where the latter's status is not in question (see example (11)).

The examples in (12) and (13) show instances where the hierarchical relation between two people of the same gender is called into question by circumstances. Now consider cross-gender cases in (14) and (15) below.

(14) a. A slave (raising his machete to attack) to Ẹfúnsetán [01:03:32]

Ìwọ	**ìyá**	**wòkè**	**kó*o***	**wolẹ̀**	***ọ***	**dantán**	**lónǐ**
2SG	mother	lookup	that.***2SG***	look.ground	***2SG***	do.last	in.today

'You old woman, look up and look down, you have done your final act today.'

b. Ẹfúnsetán to the slave who wants to attack her [01:03:53]

Óyá	**Ømú**	**àdá**	**ọwọ́**	***ẹ***	**wá!**
Now	**2SG**.give	machete	hand	***2SG***	come

'Now give me the machete in your hand!'

(15) a. Ààrẹ to Ẹfúnsetán [01:12:56]

Ẹfúnsetán	**iná**	**tí**	**mọ́*ọ***
Ẹfúnsetán	fire	PFV	catch.***2SG***

'Ẹfúnsetán, you are finished.'

b. Ẹfúnsetán to Ààrẹ [01:12:58]

Ina	**mọ*ọ***	**Latoosa**
Fire	catch.***2SG***	Latoosa

'You are finished, Latoosa.'

In (14a), we have a case where a slave expressly challenges the authority of his mistress. This challenge of hierarchical relation is reflected in the use of pronouns. The slave uses singular pronouns to refer to Ẹfúnsetán, indicating that he is no longer bound by the social hierarchy that stipulates the use of plural pronouns to refer to people in a position of authority. This situation also shows that hierarchical relations in Yoruba are situationally defined in every interaction rather than a set of rigid requirements that must be observed in every conversation. This is the same thing we see in (15). Let us first observe that in a normal situation where the king's authority is not in question, he wields all the power to determine how a conversation proceeds. He can issue insults, interrupt and exercise all other forms of dominance. For instance, during a meeting in the palace [14:50], when Ẹfúnsetán wants to contribute to the discussion, starting with a formulaic expression that places the king higher in the social hierarchy and puts her down the hierarchy, he shuts her down in an insulting manner, and Ẹfúnsetán did not protest. However, when the circumstance changes as we have it in (15), Ẹfúnsetán not only uses singular pronouns to refer to the king but also calls him by his first name. These actions indicate that in this situation, Ẹfúnsetán strips the king of the status accorded him by the society, bringing him to her level on the hierarchy: two people with an equal amount of power.

What all of these examples show is that socially defined hierarchies are negotiated in every single interaction. When participants adhere to these hierarchies, we have asymmetry in the use of pronouns, but when circumstances are such that a person's status is challenged by a participant or by a given situation, we have cases of symmetric use of pronouns, which brings participants to the same level on the hierarchy. The symmetry and asymmetry described above for pronouns in Yoruba are certainly not limited to the language. Similar patterns have been documented for

languages such as French, German, Italian, and Spanish, where the motivations have mainly been power and solidarity (Brown and Gilmer 1960).

5. Discussion

Given that in many situations, men occupy the higher levels on socially defined hierarchies—they are the kings, husbands, fathers, brothers-in-law, chiefs, etc.—it follows that Yoruba women will have to use honorific pronouns to refer to both men and women more than men. We thus have an instance of gender pattern in the use of pronouns in Yoruba: women use honorific pronouns more than men. If we were to follow the traditional practice in language and gender research (going back to Lakoff 1973), we would be led to conclude that excessive use of plural (honorific) pronouns are part of women's language in Yoruba. But this will not only be wrong but also misleading. It would also be too simplistic. We have seen that what determines the use of honorific pronouns in Yoruba is the social hierarchy (defined in 1-7) present in a given interaction, not gender. The use of honorific pronouns can thus be considered a feature of powerless language rather than of women's language[4]. Yoruba women can then be said to use more of this feature because society constantly places them lower on socially constructed hierarchies. This conclusion aligns perfectly with O'Bar and Atkins' (1980) argument that the varieties that have been traditionally regarded as women's language should be called powerless language.

For the sake of typology, it seems right to distinguish between powerless language that women use more from women's language (such as the Ubang female language and *isihlonipho sebafazi)* that society makes powerless. This distinction makes it possible to more effectively study the interaction among language, gender, and power. It also makes it possible to see the interaction between language evolution and socially constructed power dynamics. For instance, the Ubang people believe that they are a unique people because God gave two languages to only them. (Adegoke 2018). Their folk explanation of why they have "two languages" does include a linguistic separation of the genders, but power dynamics enter the picture when women are forbidden from speaking "men's language" even though men can speak the two varieties. Given this understanding, we can then begin to ask questions about whether it is gender differentiation, power differentiation, or a combination of both that gave rise to "two languages" in Ubang.

At any rate, a distinction between "powerless language" that women use more and "women's languages" that are made powerless makes it possible to ask why the former is more preponderant than the latter. We can also ask whether it is possible at all for there to be gender differentiation in a language without the motivation being power dynamics.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that Yoruba women use honorific pronouns more than men. Instead of categorizing the use of honorific pronouns in Yoruba as a feature of women's language (a move which would have aligned with Lakoff 1973), I follow O'Bar and Atkins' (1980) and Wetzel's (1988) and argue that the use of honorific pronouns in Yoruba is a feature of powerless language which Yoruba women use more because the Yoruba culture, all else being equal, puts them lower on socially constructed hierarchies. Another major argument in the paper is that each situation defines the hierarchy or hierarchies between participants and that this is what determines who uses what kind of pronouns This is reminiscent of the point observed in Oyetade (1995) that situations sometimes supersede societal expectations, what he refers to as the situational constraint. In normal situations where two participants *x* and *y* agree that *x* is higher in status, *y* uses honorific

[4] A reviewer questions the need to argue against an argument that use of honorific pronouns is a feature of women's language in Yoruba when such argument does not exist in the literature. I believe that it is part of good research to consider plausible/alternative explanations for a linguistic phenomenon even when such alternative explanations have not been advanced in any work. Scholars who develop theories and models in linguistics do these all the time, and I believe that it is a good feature of a well-developed research.

pronouns (*V* forms) to refer to *x* while *x* uses singular pronouns (*T* forms) to refer to y, irrespective of x's and y's gender. Whereas, in situations where such hierarchies are called into question by a participant or by the situation, there will be symmetry in the use of pronouns by *x* and *y*. Long story short, symmetry or asymmetry in the use of Yoruba pronouns is determined not by gender but by power. The use of honorific pronouns in Yoruba is thus a matter of situational power and not of gender. Finally, making a distinction between "powerless language" that women use more and "women's language" that is made powerless by social dynamics allows us to ask some fundamental questions about typology, language evolution, and the causal relations among language, power, and gender.

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