

Gender Differences in Speech Acts Use among Members of County Assembly of Bomet, Kenya

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Abstract

The study sought to analyse the utterances of Members of County Assembly of Bomet in order to determine whether there was any significant difference in the use of speech acts by male and female participants during debates at the County Assembly. The study used Austin's (1962) and Searle's (1969) Speech Act Theory. The study purposefully sampled three motions from the Hansards recorded between the years 2013 and 2017. The data was downloaded from Bomet County Assembly's website. Textual analysis was used to collect data. The data collected was analysed using descriptive statistics. The results showed that there was no uniform distribution of speech acts for male and female Members of County Assembly. In Motions 1 and 2, the males enjoyed a higher distribution of all types of speech acts. However, the trend changed in Motion 3 where female participants had a higher number of the types of speech acts except for declarations, which registered a null value. The study concluded that the variations in the use of speech acts is related to the number of participants and the number of turns taken by each gender. Therefore, women who get into the County Assembly should look beyond their low numbers and try to maximize their impact on the political activities in the assembly. It is hoped that the study will contribute to existing knowledge on pragmatics and particularly the relationship between the use of speech acts and gender.

Keywords: Speech Acts, Gender, Debates, Distribution, Pragmatics

1. Introduction

Several studies done on the relationship between language and gender have revealed that indeed males and females use language differently (Lakoff, 1998; Fishman, 1998; van Dijk, 2008; Tannen, 1990). Although these scholars give various reasons, many of the differences point to the nature of the society in which individuals are socialized. Many researchers make a distinction between "sex" and "gender", with the term "sex" referring to the innate and biological aspect while "gender" refers to the social roles assigned to an individual on account of their being male or female (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003; Sunderland, 2006).

Children learn to behave differently from the other sex via the stereotypes they observe, create and reflect in their groups (Spolsky, 1998). Because of the different social contexts where children learn to carry on friendly conversations (Sunderland, 2006, p. 116), the difference between boys' and girls' use of language is reinforced. The difference in language use between male and female have been observed within groups of children even younger than 5 years old (Maltz & Borker, 1982). Through their studies on children's interaction, Maltz and Borker conclude that girls learn to create and maintain relationships of closeness and equality, to criticize others in acceptable ways, whereas boys learn to assert their position of dominance, to attract and maintain an audience and to assert themselves when others have the floor. From these observations, it is clear that the society in which individuals grow up has an immense influence on the way they act and use language. Gender is thus an important variable in language use and because research has established that men and women use language differently, speech acts are no exception. For this reason, this paper investigates the role of gender in the realization of various speech acts that as observed during debates by Members of County Assembly at the County Assembly of Bomet, Kenya. Bomet County is inhabited mainly by the Kipsigis community that is by nature culturally patriarchal.

It is worth mentioning that lot has changed in the political scene among the Kipsigis in particular and Kenya in general. Gender equality in Kenya is slowly being realized and women, though still few, have found their way into leadership positions.

There are now women Members of County Assembly, Members of Parliament and even women Governors like the Late Dr. Joyce Laboso, a Kipsigis from Bomet County. In the first County Assembly of Bomet, there were only 10 female MCAs out of the 36 Members of County Assembly. The small number of women getting elective positions may be attributed to societal or cultural factors that still prefer males in leadership positions. This paper examines how the women who get into the County Assembly use language to participate in the debates as compared to their male counterparts. This was done by looking at the speech acts of the women and those of men and the reasons for their disparity.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Gender and Speech Activity

Some theoretical and empirical studies have tried to provide explanations on why men and women behave differently during conversations. Some scholars suggest that these differences are a result of culture (Abena, 1991; Kariuki, 2010). They point to cultural stereotypes about gender and expectations related to social roles. For instance, Kariuki (2010) argues that the gender differences in most Kenyan societies are not a result of one's sex but a creation of Kenyan cultures that are primarily patriarchal. He continues to say that once a child is born, patriarchal aspects of their society are inculcated into his or her mind through socialization.

Affirming the above views, Rivai (2015) posits that men and women are different physically, and these differences invite society to establish different social roles and patterns of conduct, including conduct in speech. Sunahrowi (as cited in Rivai, 2015) notes that one is able to discern the gender of a person only by observing their use of language. Rivai concludes that the wider and more rigid the gap between male and female roles in a given society the wider and more rigid the differences in linguistic tendencies will be. Rivai explains that men and women have different psychological characteristics that are reflected in verbal communication and which make a decisive impact on language use of the males and females. He explains that in post-puberty, men tend to take risks, like trying to be brave, firm and decisive, being straightforward, and tend to be more careless and pay less attention to detail. On the other hand, women tend to be quiet, gentle, delicate, polite and friendly. Women also pay more attention to detail; they think more and have stringer aesthetic ability and a strong desire to be supported by the opposite sex, but they hesitate more and are timid. According to Rivai, these psychological characteristics are directly reflected in language behaviour, which shows that women are more emotional in content of speech and focus on the function of speech to maintain their emotions. Meanwhile, men's words are more direct, frank, less emotional, focus on the function of verbal transmission of information.

Tannen (1990) concurs with Rivai's observations, explaining that feminine socialization emphasizes relationship and sensitivity while masculine socialization stresses independence and power. According to Tannen, women's talk is "rapport talk"; men's talk is "report talk". Tannen adds that women use talk to create symmetry or equality between people, men use talk to establish status and power. In Tannen's study, it was observed that men's conversational interests seemed to be business and money, followed by sports. Women's topics were men and clothes. Men talked of their position of powerfulness; women talked of their position of relative powerlessness both in the society and in the context of particular relationships.

Other scholars have also made important contributions regarding the differences in language use between men and women. Haas (1979) argues that men are more directive, use more non-standard forms and talk more about sports, money, and business while women are more supportive, polite, and expressive about emotions. Parallel with these, male speech is considered to be competitive and individualistic while female speech is cooperative and other-oriented (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003).

Other scholars have studied the action and speech activities of women in the political arena and found differences in language use between men and women. For instance, Eagly (1987) argues that the dual burden of women-domestic duties at home and political responsibilities will ultimately affect their participation in political fields. Assuming responsibilities at home, women develop traits that manifest communal and less aggressive behaviour (Eagly & Wendy, 1991). Therefore, the prevailing political culture of masculinity engrained in legislative assemblies and organizations such as political parties may act as a major obstacle to female politicians (Lovenduski, 2005).

Women in leadership positions have also been found to speak less than do male leaders. One key explanation is women's fear of backlash, which may deter them from engaging in debates in the same way as their male counterparts, despite holding leadership positions. The risk of backlash may increase when women's numbers rise since male colleagues may feel threatened and close down space for women's participation and influence (Grey, 2006; Heath, Roseanna, Schwindt & Michelle, 2005; Kathlene, 2005).

According to Brescoll (2012) and Mast (2002), gender is central in determining talking time. They point out that, regardless of power differences, women tend to engage less in verbal aggressiveness or dominant behaviour. Gass(2004) investigated conversational interaction between men and women managers in small groups at management school. She found that male managers used linguistic strategies associated with display such as joking, swearing and talking about competition and aggression. One of the reasons given for this phenomenon is that men tended to participate more fully in public contexts in that the interactional norms in the work place are male interactional norms (Coates, 2013). Lakoff (1990) suggests that the norms of men's discourse styles are institutionalized and that they are seen as "not only the better way to talk but the only way."

The studies cited above are all important to this study in seeking to establish the reasons behind the differences in the use of speech acts by both male and female Members of County Assembly of Bomet. Taken together, these theoretical and empirical works would predict that female Members at the County Assembly of Bomet would be less vocal than their male counterparts. The present study sought to explore if this would be the case.

Bomet County is largely inhabited by the Kipsigis people, a sub-tribe of the Kalenjin community. The Kipsigis society is patriarchal in nature and in a family unit, the man, considered as the head of the family, makes most of the decisions on behalf of his wife(wives) and children. Though the cultural attitudes towards men and women have shifted radically in the modern times, it may not be surprising to discover that these practices still play a role in the nature of interactions between male and female MCAs from the area.

3. Methodology

The study used purposive sampling to select three motions from the Bomet County Assembly records for analysis. The motions were those appearing in the County Assembly's Hansards that were recorded between 2013 and 2017. The researchers downloaded the data from the e-version of Hansards available at Bomet County Assembly's website. After downloading the Hansards, the researchers read the selected motions to identify the speech acts contained therein. The speech acts from the same gender were grouped together. The researchers then categorized the speech acts based on Searle's (1969) five categories of speech acts. These five categories of speech acts are: assertives or representatives, directives, expressives, declaratives, and commissives. After this, the researchers calculated the frequency of occurrence of speech acts to ease the reading of the data. The interpretation of data was thematically and with the aid of figures and tables.

4. Results and Discussion

The table below shows the distribution of speech acts as used by male and female members of County Assembly of Bomet in the 3 sampled motions.

Table 1: Distribution of Speech Acts according to Gender

Speech Acts	Motion 1		Motion 2		Motion 3		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Assertives	41	4	46	19	5	23	138
Expressives	20	5	25	6	3	10	69
Directives	21	1	18	6	3	4	53
Declarations	5	5	6	3	2	0	21
Commissives	4	0	5	0	0	2	11
Total	91	15	100	34	15	39	292

Our analysis revealed different distribution of speech acts for male and female Members of County Assembly. In Motions 1 and 2, the males enjoyed a higher distribution of all types of speech acts. However, the trend changed in Motion 3 where female participants had a higher number of the types of speech acts except for declarations, which registered a null value. The results could be attributed to the number of participants and the number of turns taken by each gender. In Motion 1, the number of females who participated in the debate were only two compared to their male counterparts who were 14 in number, excluding the Speaker. The male participants also had 55 turns (excluding the Speaker) compared to females who had 9 turns. This could explain why the males had 91 speech acts against 15 speech acts used by female participants. These findings were consistent with what Forbes and Cordella(1999) found out on

their study of the Chilean parliament. The Chilean argumentative discourse showed that the gender composition of a group may determine the frequency with which participants use a particular argumentative strategy.

Similarly, in Motion 2, the number of males who participated were 14 whereas the female participants were 2. The number of turns taken by male participants were 22 while their female counterparts had 11 turns. Another observation made was that Hon. Joyce Korir, a female, had the highest number of turns at 9 compared to the rest of the participants. This revealed that it may not be the gender that determines the frequency of speech acts used but it could be the number of participants. In Motion 2, the speech acts used by male participants stood at 100 while the speech acts used by females were 34 in total. Commenting on women MCAs in Kenya, Bouka, Muthoni, Marie and Natalie (2018) note that their participation and influence vary greatly across the counties. For instance, women MCAs in Nyandarua County who were all nominated were significantly less active and engaged compared to their male counterparts. That one nominated MCA lamented that, “all the nominated members who are mainly women are just there! They just attend the assembly and go home.” However, women like Dorcas Njoroge and Patricia Wanjugu were singled out as being active debaters on the floor of the assembly. According to Bouka *et al.*, women MCAs in cities tend to be active in agenda setting. For example, in a city like Kisumu where there is a long history of women’s participation in politics, women were found to be successful in agenda setting.

In Motion 3, the tide changed because the female participants had a higher number of speech acts compared to males. They had 39 and 15, respectively. The total number of participants were 4; 2 males and 2 females. Each gender also had 3 turns. It was therefore observed that what contributed to the number of speech acts may not only be the number of participants but the length of the turns as well. This finding seemed to contradict some earlier studies that suggested that men tend to participate more fully than women in public contexts by speaking for longer, taking more turns and interrupting others. For instance, Kathlene (1995) studied floor apportionment in 12 US State legislative committee hearings and found that male participants spoke for longer and took more turns than did women, and that men made and received more interruptions than did women committee members.

The distribution of illocutionary acts based on gender were as shown in the following chart.

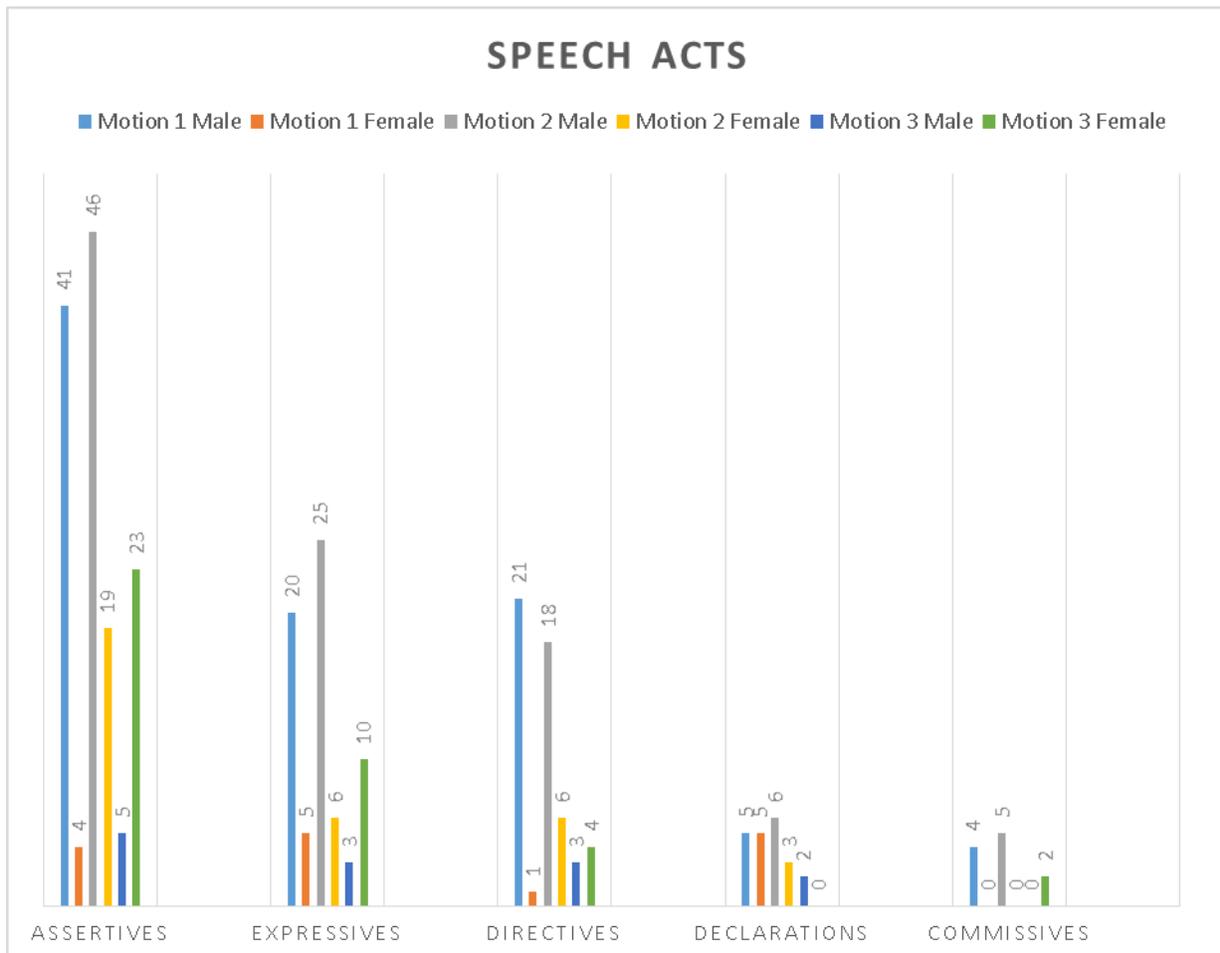


Figure 1: Distribution of speech acts based on gender

It seems therefore that the gender of the participants, the number of turns and the length of these turns are important factors to consider in any argumentative discourse. As Grimshaw (1990) observes, there are some constraining factors that may determine how an argument is carried out by a participant. These factors include things like ethnicity, chosen topic, participants' relations and orientations, considerations of utility and linguistic devices that are employed.

Regarding specific types of speech acts, it was observed that assertives were the most preferred speech acts employed by both men and women. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Members of County Assembly of Bomet often said what they believed to be the truth. Most of the assertive acts were used to inform and report what the participants believed to be true. There were significant differences across gender in the use of assertive speech acts. For instance, the illocutionary force of informing occurred 16 times in Motion 1. Out of this, the women performed this act only once; the rest were performed by their male counterparts. In Motion 2, the act of informing occurred 20 times. The males had 17 occurrences while the females had 3 occurrences. In Motion 3, there were 11 occurrences of the act of informing with the males performing it 7 times and the females 4 times.

When it comes to the illocutionary force of reporting, analysis showed a significant gap in the performance of this act between the men and the women at the County Assembly of Bomet. In Motion 1, there were 17 occurrences of the illocutionary force of informing. The men used it 16 times whereas the women used it once. In Motion 2, the men used the act of reporting 15 times, whereas the women used it 3 times. In Motion 3, the women used the act of reporting more than did their male counterparts. The women used it 7 times while the males used it once. The findings indicated that the functions of speech acts might be directly related to the number of participants and the length of their speeches. In the expressive category, the overall results indicated that there was a significant difference in the way men and women expressed their feelings, thoughts and attitudes at the County Assembly of Bomet. Men used this act more frequently than did the women. For example, the expressive act of thanking was used more frequently by men than by women, even when it was not directed at the Speaker of the County Assembly. In Motion 1, the men used it 11 times compared to 3 times for the women. The expressive act of complaining was used three times by men in Motion 1 compared to only 1 time by the women in the same Motion. In Motion 2, the act of complaining was used 13 times by men and only once by the women. Therefore, it can be said that both men and women expressed their feelings during debates, although these feelings were expressed differently.

Directive acts were also performed by participants at the County Assembly. Directives are those acts that the speaker uses in order to make the listener carry out some functions or to act in a certain way as intended by the speaker. The most common type of directive used during debates was requests. Men and women used requests, although the males were found to use it more in Motion 1. The men used requests 6 times while the women had 1 occurrence. In Motions 2 and 3, there was an almost balanced use of this act by both men and women. In Motion 2, the males used directives once while the females used it twice. Similarly, in Motion 3, the women used it once while the men did not use it. The results indicate that most utterances employed by both men and women were polite. It was also seen that the acts of commanding, ordering and demanding, which are all under directive speech acts, were missing. It was therefore concluded that the Kipsigis men at the County Assembly, who were mostly brought up in a patriarchal society, were surprisingly not forceful but polite.

In the declarative category, the performative verb 'declare' was the most preferred speech act. It was used by both men and women during debates at the County Assembly. The men used this speech act slightly more frequently than the women. For instance, in Motion 1, the men used it 6 times whereas the women used it 3 times. In Motion 2, the men used it 5 times while the women used it twice. In Motion 3, the men used it once while the women never used it at all. The fact that declaratives were used by both genders indicate that both men and women can change the status of the person, object or society by performing an act. It gives the interlocutors authority to change the state of affairs in the society.

Regarding commissives, there was no difference between males and females in the performance of speech acts. The interlocutors sparingly used commissives to promise, guarantee, refuse and vow. The results suggested that both men and women expressed actions they intended to accomplish in future for the betterment of the people of Bomet County.

Analysis of speech acts show that both men and women employed all types of speech acts as categorized by Searle (1969). The quantity and the type of speech act fluctuated because of the different motions that were brought before the County Assembly for deliberation. In addition, analysis of speech acts revealed that, generally, women and men have the same quality in speaking, but that men seem to exert a little more power than do the women because of their numerical strength, which contributes to their (men) use of more speech act types as well as more turns.

The study further revealed that even though the 2010 constitution and devolution are key enablers of women seeking public office in Kenya, Kenyan women are still under-represented at the County Assembly. According to Boukaet *al.* (2018), the 2013 elections in Kenya saw only 33 percent of women being elected as MCAs of whom 10 percent held

elective seats. In the County Assembly of Bomet, of the 25 elective posts, only 3 women were elected. That means that these few women entered a male dominated domain and their numerical inferiority was inevitably reflected in the number and frequency of speech acts used during discussion. This explains why males led in almost all the categories of speech acts.

The reasons for low number of women MCAs and their lack of active participation during debates may be attributed to social as well as cultural factors. Traditions, in many countries, continue to emphasize women's primary roles as mothers and housewives, and restrict them to those roles. A traditional strong, patriarchal value system favours sexually segregated roles, and traditional cultural values militate against advancement, progress and participation of women in any political system (Boukaet *al.*, 2018). Even though there is a lot of pressure to change the traditional gender roles, the culture prevalent around the world still favours men, especially in the political arena. Indeed, Yoon (2004) report that on a global survey, only about 39 states have elected a woman president or prime minister. This can also explain why most researches in Kenya, according to Nzomo (2011), are preoccupied with the issue of access and presence of women in political leadership. It is worth mentioning that Kenya has made great strides in promoting gender equality in almost all spheres of life, although women still find themselves outnumbered in most leadership positions.

5. Conclusion

There are differences in the use of speech acts between male and female members of the County Assembly of Bomet. As such, the use of speech acts is related to the number of participants and the number of turns taken by each gender. The study showed that males are more than females at the County Assembly and, therefore, participation is highly skewed in favour of males. The males lead in the use of almost all categories of speech acts.

The traditional Kipsigis society was a patriarchal one where decision-making was the preserve of men. The women's place was in the kitchen and child welfare. This cultural notion of gender roles will inevitably affect female members' participation and influence at the nature of representation in the County Assembly of Bomet. Therefore, women who get into the County Assembly should look beyond their low numbers and try to maximize their impact on the political activities in the assembly.

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