
Language in the service of disempowerment: Unpacking women's socialization in Ekegusii

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Abstract: This paper seeks to illustrate how sexualized Ekegusii transitive verbs and common nouns portray women as passive recipients of men's actions, reinforcing their subordinate roles in the Gusii community. It addresses two questions: Do sexualized Ekegusii verbs and nouns discriminate against women? And how does this language impact the self-concept and worldview of Gusii girls and young women? Based on a study in Southern Kisii, Kenya, the findings reveal how language can be used discursively to socialize girls into accepting a feminine ideal that perpetuates their subordinate status. Ekegusii nouns and verbs were found to be used discursively to depict women as powerless and inferior persons, underscoring the need to examine this language as a tool for social control. Raising awareness could lead to healthier self-concepts and support the broader struggle against gender inequality in the community. The study also highlights that the linguistic framing of women adversely affects the self-image and agency of Gusii girls and women, indicating that language not only reflects societal attitudes but also shapes individual perceptions. It emphasizes the urgent need for increased self-awareness and critical reflection among girls regarding the discursive use of Ekegusii, thereby enabling them to actively contribute to combating oppressive gender dynamics in society.

Keywords: Critical discourse analysis, Gusii girls, Sexist attitudes, Socialization, Transitivity

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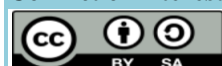
1. Introduction

Ekegusii Language has a linguistic habit of passivizing women and young girls (Aberi 2009; Choti 1998), thereby imagining them as passive recipients and /or beneficiaries of men's actions. This paper examines how sexualized Ekegusii transitive verbs and the naming system influence Gusii girls' self-perception and worldview. Transitivity in traditional grammar entails how meanings are represented in the clause, and is linguistically focused on the "propositional meanings and functions of syntactic elements" in a text (Emilia et al., 2017). In Halliday and Mathiessen's (2014) view, the transitivity system of a language provides an all-inclusive grammatical resource for interpreting and representing the goings-on in society. On its part, Passivization is the process that happens when a transitive verb's direct object in the active voice is shifted to the subject position in the passive voice, turning the active object into the passive subject (Janks, 1997; Machin & Mayr 2012). In other words, the initial subject that is an obligatory actor/agent in the active voice (for example, as shown by the transitive verb) is moved to the object position that is not obligatory in the passive voice (for example, it becomes a non-actor because it is not related to the agent of the action). In this respect, analyzing passivization/transitivity entails the study of social action that involves studying verbs to demonstrate who is represented as the doer of an action (agent) and the recipient of such an action in texts (Machin & Mayr 2012). From Martin's (2000) standpoint, the view of meaning from the perspective of transitivity/passivization prompts us to ask such questions as:

- i. Who is acting in a discourse/text?
- ii. What kind of action is he/she involved in?

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iii. What or who is he/she acting upon?

For instance, when Gusii men in this study are said to provide for their families, they are depicted as agents, while women are imaged as the medium (Martin, 2000) and/or recipients that depend on men for their survival. In effect, this framing style helps to construct the Gusii women and girls as having no agency, hence incapable of taking care of themselves.

From the perspective of language, power, and control (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2010), passivization serves to subordinate the obligatory subject in the active voice- by shifting it to the object position of the main clause within the larger hierarchical structure. For instance, passivization entails a manipulative process that transforms an active clause like, *Trump kicked Jezebel*, into a passive clause like, *Jezebel was kicked by Trump*, where the subject / agent of the active clause becomes a non-actor. In this way, transitivity choices in texts have the potential to illuminate the varied ways in which people perceive actions and events occurring inside and outside them, as they (transitivity choices) reflect how people perceive and shape their understanding of events in the world around them (Varga, 2010: 34). This supports the idea that language not only describes reality, but it also serves as a way to construct reality (Fairclough 1995; 2013; Aberi, 2016; Obwoye, 2021; Ombongi, 2024).

For instance, our study of transitivity/passivization in Ekegusii helped us in this study not only to uncover the varied types of sexualized Ekegusii *verbs* that are manipulated to characterize the actions and behaviour of the Gusii women and their male counterparts, but also the circumstances underlying such a manipulative processes. In this paper, passivization entails the process by which women and girls are made to accept issues affecting them in life without reacting or trying to question them.

What is more, naming conventions within the Gusii speech community involve the use of common nouns to name children after places and landmarks, animals, recent events and seasons like war and migration, deceased persons from the father's or mother's lineage, including human behavior/character (Obwoye 2014; Onchoke 2018). A naming system entails the means by which people supply objects with names; it allows people to map names to objects for purposes of identification (William et al., 1999). For example, the women's names *Bisieri* and *Kwamboka* in Ekegusii mean "ever being into people's houses" and "going across the river" respectively, while the men's names, *Getare* and *Oeri* mean "the rock" and "the Bull," in that order. In this context, Choti (1998) and Otiso (2015) emphasize that naming in Ekegusii is a process of gendering, considering that the names assigned to a particular gender are "culturally predetermined." For instance, the scholars note that men in the Gusii speech community are commonly assigned names of common heroes, historic features and cash crops, while women are given names of vegetables and other edibles, including items suggestive of ornaments and beauty.

As a cultural practice, however, the Gusii naming system can be said to be based on particular cultural practices and gender assumptions that seek to objectify and control women through language. Such gender assumptions and cultural practices serve not only to define how young women and men perceive the world and themselves in different contexts (Macionis, 1992), but may also be detrimental to their psyche (Orchardson-Mazrui, 2006). Though Ekegusii language has a variety of common nouns that reflect the Gusii people's feelings and attitudes towards the things, events or issues that they refer to (Aberi, 2009; Onchoke, 2018; Mose, 2022), this study analyzed only those common nouns that carry cultural meanings capable of impairing girls' self-concept and perceptions of the world. Common nouns were selected for this study, in view of their ability to supply pragmatic information about the Gusii people's ideological beliefs, only available at their contexts of use.

2. Theoretical framework

Critical discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA) was particularly adopted for this study because of its key focus on how issues of social power abuse, dominance, ideology and inequality are expressed and validated through discourse (Fairclough, 2003, 2009; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009; Van Dijk, 1998). As will be demonstrated in this study, Ekegusii language is riddled with manifestations of dominance and inequality, expressed in the representations of the Gusii girls, and in the articulation of their self-identity and worldview. With emphasis on the dialectical relations between language and society, CDA seeks to investigate the link between "language and social structures and relations" (Trckova, 2011: 22). This understanding is better captured by Fairclough (1992: 64), when he asserts that discourse is not only influenced and limited by social structures at every level, including societal class and specific institutional relationships, but it also plays a role in shaping these social structures, as well as in establishing the norms and conventions that define it (discourse), along with the relationships, identities, and institutions that underpin them.

More particularly, CDA focuses on the relationship between language, power and ideology, and seeks to uncover the different ways in which discourse is shaped by the existing power relations, as well as the influence of discourse on the reproduction, undermining and/or transformation of the existing relations (Trckova, 2011: 22). It is in this sense that CDA undertakes to lay bare the ideological determinations and effects of discourse that get naturalized and begin to be seen as commonsensical (Fairclough, 1995). In this respect, CDA not only seeks to examine texts to uncover unequal power relations, but also to find ways for redressing existing inequalities (Martin, 2000: 275). To achieve this goal, CDA adopts the analytical tools of Halliday's (1985;1994) Systemic Functional Linguistics theory (henceforth SFL), more so, because of its technical language for addressing issues of power and ideologies in discourse, as well as the ability to link language use with social context (Martin, 2000: 275).

Using CDA, discourse analysts have studied how women and girls are represented in political and media discourses. For instance, Aberi (2009) studied the influence of gendered Ekegusii linguistic structures on girl's view of education; Ndambuki (2010) examined the portrayal of women's interests and needs in discourse within Makuani District, Kenya; while Njagi (2013) researched the representation of power relations in Ki-Embu proverbs, Kenya. On her part, Otiso

(2015) looked at gender Construction in Ekegusii, while Wagunda, Oluoch and Ogenga (2020) studied the representation of intimate partner violence in the Kenyan mainstream media. The current study adopted CDA considering its key focus on issues of power and ideology in discourse, which characterize Ekegusii discourse that is under investigation in this paper. In this context, the use of CDA helped us to unravel how the use of sexualized Ekegusii transitive verbs and naming system are associated with particular cultural aspects and meanings that were found to be responsible for the girls' and young women's negative self-perception, perverted view of the world, and unequal power relations with boys/men in the Gusii speech community. These understandings are well captured in the discussion below.

3. Research methodology

To enable the researcher to develop an informed understanding of the subjects' intentions and processes responsible for their behaviour (Lee 2011), this study used a descriptive research design to examine and describe girl's behavior and experiences of their self-concept and world view. The study utilized qualitative data analysis methods to examine the data in accordance with the study's objectives. This enabled the researcher to gain an informed understanding of the subjects' intentions and processes behind their behaviour (Lee 2011): "Qualitative research seeks to understand and represent the perspectives of the participants who act on the material world" (Lee, 2011: 41). In this context, a critical discourse analysis was conducted on the qualitative data collected, with the understanding that there is no set procedure for there is no standardized method for performing discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003). Additionally, our research employed quantitative data analysis techniques to convert the teachers' responses into percentages, highlighting the predominant opinions and attitudes.

Upon getting approval from the District Education authorities, the researcher proceeded to identify the schools for the study using convenience-sampling procedures (Buchstaller, Isabelle & Ghada, 2013; Mugenda & Mugenda, 1999). These sampling methods allowed the researcher to choose only those schools (cases) that were accessible and convenient, with subjects readily available for the study. Consequently, the researcher contacted the school principals and notified them about his intention to investigate their school girls in relation to their (girls') self-concept and world view through focus group discussions. After receiving approval from the school heads, the researcher was then introduced to his respondents, to whom an announcement was made concerning the intended study. Interested participants were then selected using a table of random numbers and notified of the meeting time for the group discussions. In this respect, six focus group discussions were formed, with 8 girls in each group. In this respect, only girls aged between 14 and 19 years were included in each focus group, so as to enhance the researcher's ability to notice their shared experiences based on gender. In total, forty-eight (48) girls were purposefully chosen from six secondary schools, which included two public girls' secondary schools, one public mixed boarding secondary school, one public mixed day secondary school, and two private mixed day and boarding secondary schools located in Southern Kisii District, Kenya, with each school proving 8 girls from each class (form one to form four) for the study. These were taken to be enough for promoting the generalizability (Buchstaller & Ghada, 2013: 84) of results from the data collected.

Likewise, focus group discussions were adopted for the study, drawing on the assumption that the girls' individual attitudes towards the subject of the study are not essentially given, but rather "discursively constructed through interaction" (Aydın-Duzgit, 2017:103). Our study picked more public secondary schools than private schools, based on the researcher's belief that public schools had a larger population of girls compared to private schools, which had fewer students. All of the girls selected for the study identified themselves as native speakers of Ekegusii and were considered representative of the typical Gusii girls in secondary schools throughout the broader Gusii community. Notice that before starting the focus group discussions, all the participants were informed that their participation was purely voluntary, and that their responses were to be kept "confidential and secure" (Nadal & Melissa, 2016). In this context, respondents were asked to respond to a number of open-ended questions, as a means of creating rapport necessary for an open and honest discussion about their shared experiences.

Our study also included 24 teachers, who were purposefully selected from each of the schools in which girls were interviewed. The male and female teachers completed a questionnaire with items based on a five-point Likert scale (Boone & Boone, 2012) to make it easier for the subjects to respond to the questions. The questionnaire included 10 open-ended and closed-ended questions written in English, considering that they were teachers of the learners under investigation. This category of respondents was chosen because they were native speakers of Ekegusii and had practical and relevant experience regarding the use of Ekegusii in varied contexts.

3.1. Corpus

In accordance with the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which does not mandate a specific set of linguistic tools for analysis (Meyer, 2001), this study selected sexualized verbs and common nouns that were pertinent to its objectives and could facilitate meaningful conclusions. Recognizing that language serves as a medium for expressing our attitudes, beliefs, ideas, thoughts, feelings, and opinions (Choti, 1998; Onchoke, 2018), the gendered Ekegusii verbs and common nouns were chosen through a careful review of the responses from teachers and girls, reflecting both constructive and destructive attitudes of the Gusii community towards women. Additionally, the selected sexualized Ekegusii transitive verbs and common nouns were believed to be integral to the language, capable of conveying the social practices, feelings, opinions, attitudes, and thoughts of the Gusii people regarding women (Aberi, 2009). Consequently, using purposeful sampling methods (Suri, 2011), the researcher identified five sexualized verbs and five common nouns from the Gusii speech community for analysis. These ten linguistic items were deemed sufficient for the study, as a single text can yield extensive data when subjected to critical discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 1997). Although a comprehensive lexicon of Ekegusii that categorizes all sexualized verbs and common nouns does not exist,

these structures were selected based on their relevance to the research topic, frequency of use in everyday language, and potential to illustrate how language contributes to the socialization and disempowerment of women in Ekegusii society. In addition, it is understood that these linguistic items carry significant ideological beliefs and biases, making their analysis valuable for uncovering the discursive use of language within the Gusii community. Furthermore, rather than striving for a quantitative measure that could at times mislead, the study prioritizes the qualitative dimensions of language use to ensure a deep understanding of the nuanced ways in which language shapes and reflects gender dynamics related to the topic under investigation

4. Findings and discussions

The study confirmed the presence of various sexualized verbs and common nouns within the Gusii speech community. This was accomplished by identifying and analyzing diverse responses (words and statements) that illustrated the form and characteristics of gendered Ekegusii verbs and common nouns. These existed in the form of foregrounding (placing an object in the subject position, thereby giving it prominence); and backgrounding (placing/an item in the object position, thereby denying it the prominence attributed to the subject position); insinuations (comments that are slyly suggestive, hence, hard to challenge) (Huckin, 1997); and presuppositions (the use of certain words and /or persuasive rhetoric that takes particular ideas for granted in the text (Huckin, 2002; Saarinen, 2008). Presuppositions and insinuations represent beliefs that underpin a specific system of knowledge (Dilts, 1998). Their inclusion in this study was intentional, as they could provide the researcher with insights into the shared knowledge of Gusii girls, which is believed to influence their self-concept and worldview.

Concerning the impact of sexualized verbs on girls' self-concept and worldview, including their overall attitude towards life, the study revealed that the discursive use of Ekegusii verbs and common nouns contributes to shaping a distorted self-concept and perspective among Gusii girls, which do not align with their life aspirations. This revelation was also in line with Leech's (2018) view that verbs are capable of expressing actions, events and states, thereby allowing us to recognize, understand and infer the reasons underlying our linguistic behavior.

Moreover, the discursive use of Ekegusii common nouns was found to serve to depict men as capable achievers, thereby helping to make girls and women feel inferior for having not been born male. This was largely due to the fact that, ordinarily, the native speakers of Ekegusii (who may not be trained linguists) lack the critical lens to recognize the discursive use of verbs and nouns. In this context, among the 814 responses gathered for the study, 613 responses, accounting for 75.2% (the highest proportion of respondents), indicated that the discursive use of Ekegusii verbs and common nouns distorts and negatively affects the self-image and attitudes of Gusii girls towards life (see table 1 below).

Table 1: Responses to the suggestion that the use of sexualized verbs and common nouns influence girls' self-concept and view of the world

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	301	36.9%
Agree	312	38.3%
Strongly disagree	69	8.5%
Disagree	112	13.8%
Not sure	20	2.5%
Totals	814	100%

Source: Field Data

4.1. Discussion of the findings

The aforesaid findings are adequately elaborated in the ensuing discussion.

4.1.1. Sexualized Ekegusii Transitive Verbs

Example I

Eega (to seduce)

In Ekegusii language, the term *eega* (to seduce) is taken to be a male province / domain. As such, saying: *Jane eega George* (Jane seduce George), is ridiculous. Instead, saying: *George eega Jane* (George seduce Jane), is the norm and the expected state of affairs. Here, Jane is the receiver of George's action. In context, if a woman or girl is said to have seduced a man as in: *Jane naega George* (Jane seduced George), then it is believed that something is wrong with her or she is a spoilt and promiscuous person. Therefore, the term *eega* (to seduce) in the Gusii speech community suggests that the act of wooing one for friendship and/or marriage remains a preserve for men and boys in society. This stance was stated by a respondent who retorted:

Teri boronge omoiseke gose omokungu koboria omosacha ing'a babe abasani. Abasacha nabwo baganeirie gokora bo. Kero kende Omokungu gose enyaroka eise koboria inga tobe abasani, obomaene nigo indatame egekogera oyio nabo abaise koba rikembi (It is not normal for a woman or girl to propose that we become lovers. We expect men to do this. If a woman or girl seduces or proposes to me, I will in fact run away because she could be a prostitute).

From Machin's and Mayr's (2012) notion of passivization, the aforesaid allows the subordination of the obligatory subject (girl/woman-Jane) by moving her to the object position, thereby rendering her a non-actor, i.e., George in the

sentence above is the subject and Mary the object (passive receiver of George's actions). In this context, by discursively positioning/topicalizing (Huckin 2002) men in the subject position to give them prominence and women in object position, Ekegusii discourse can be said to be giving men prominence by foregrounding their superior position, while at the same time devoicing women by backgrounding their roles, views and voice (Aschcroft, 2007; Fairclough, 1992) in society. As such, the discursive use of the term *eega* (to seduce) above, ideologically serves to reflect women as passive beings whose actions are directed by men, and as persons who are never in control of the key issues affecting them in life.

Example II

Soka (to get married).

In the Gusii speech community, it is common to hear people telling young women *soka* (to get married), more so, when they overstay at their maiden home. In this case, for instance, a woman can be told: *Moraa soka*, but the same cannot be said to a man, as in *Thomas soka*, considering that though its use is contextually determined, the term *soka* is gendered, given that it is habitually used in relation to women *per se*. This understanding was reiterated by one of the respondents, who argued that:

Omoiseke gose omokungu nabo agotebigwa soka, lakini mosacha ere tagotebigwa inga soka (A girl or woman can be told to get married, but a man cannot be told to get married)

When used in relation to men, the term 'soka' suggests a request for the person in question to 'get out' or 'move out' of somewhere. This meaning differs significantly from its implication when used with women. This understanding coheres with Onchoke's (2018: 89) view that naming practices in Ekegusii reflect the cultural reality and the Gusii people's attitudes, beliefs and worldview. From Priatmoko & Cahyono's (2013: 20) and Mazid's (2007: 354-355) notion of presupposition, for instance, the utilization of language in a way that seems to take given ideas for-granted, the use of the term *soka / nywomwa* above presupposes that only men have the right and ability to take in (marry) women, and not vice versa. This implicit claim is based on an underlying ideological belief among the Gusii people that only men are able and culturally allowed to marry women. However, it is possible that women can take in/marry men, though this is viewed as being irregular by the Gusii people. Semantically speaking therefore, by placing women at the receiving end of the participation continuum, the discursive use of Ekegusii verbs serves to weaken women's power as women through passive voice construction.

Example III

Nyuoma (to marry)

In the Gusii speech community, the act of getting marrying is believed to be undertaken solely by the male members of society. In this case, it is illogical for one to say: *Brian nanywomwa na Josephine* (Brian was married by Josephine). Instead, we are expected to say: *Josephine nanywomwa na Brian* (Josephine was married by Brian). This means that it is out of order for one to tell a woman in Ekegusii language: *Florence nywoma George* (Florence marry George). Instead, we are expected to say: *George nywoma Florence* (George marry Florence). This understanding was reiterated by one of the female teachers, who argued that:

Bakungu gose baiseke tibari konywoma basacha. Yaya. Nabwo bakonywomwa (Women or girls never marry men. No. It is them who get married to men).

This gendered representation insinuates (Huckin 1997) that women in the Gusii speech community are in-active and remain passive when men woo them and take them in as wives. From the perspective of Fairclough's (1995) notion of power and hegemony, the aforesaid passive construction serves to construct women as passive beings, who are always affected by the semiotic actions of men. This, in effect, foregrounds their image as beneficiaries of men's actions, hence their presupposed inabilities.

Example IV

Ruga (to cook)

In Ekegusii, the verb *ruga* (to cook) suggests different meanings when used with men and women. For instance, when used in relation to a woman, it communicates two gendered meanings (to cook or get married), which does not occur/apply when the same verb is used in relation to a man. That is, when used with a man, as in, *Trump naruga* (Trump cooked), it means that Trump has cooked, and has therefore one meaning. This means that when referring to a girl or woman, the term *ruga* is discursively used to mean more than it should on the basis of gender. Interestingly, however, it was noted that men who take part in cooking are perceived as having been henpecked:

Abasacha bakoruga chinsobo nigo bagambeire. Omosacha O'gusii kamiri nigo akorugerwa namokaye (Men who cook in their homes are henpecked. A really Gusii man has to be cooked for by his wife or wives).

In accordance with the CDA approach utilized in this study that focuses both on how texts are used to encode power and ideology, thereby indexing inequality, as well as finding ways for redressing such inequalities (Martin, 2000; Wodak & Fairclough, 2010), the gendered constructions above reveal the need to inform the Gusii girls about the extent to which they are discursively hoodwinked about their interests and aspirations in society. In other words, the aforesaid proposition

proves that women's femininity and positions are sociocultural constructions that can as well be dismantled for the good of all in society (Lonna, 2004).

Example V

Biaria (to impregnate)

The verb *biaria* (to impregnate), just like the majority of the gendered verbs in Ekegusii language discussed above imply that the act of impregnating a woman is solely a man's affair, in which case women remain passive recipients of man's actions. This understanding was expressed by one of the female teachers, who argued that:

Abakungu obomaene nigo bakoegwa oborito korwa ase abasacha / abanchi babo. Nora nabakungu abanyene tibagokana gose gopinga ring'ana eri (Women actually receive pregnancy from their husbands. Even women cannot dispute this fact)

In this context, however, though it is a universal fact that only men are capable of impregnating women, the Gusii verb *biaria* (to impregnate), is also used to refer to the act of helping an animal, such as a cow to deliver its young one. The term *biaria* is here used instead of the normal term *iboria* (to help a woman be delivered of a baby), which is more courteous. The term *biaria* (to impregnate) is used in many occasions when referring to animals as opposed to *iboria* (to help a woman deliver a baby). Therefore, the verb *biaria* (to impregnate) is discursively used to imply that women are passive recipients of men's actions, i.e., the act of making a woman/ girl pregnant is a man's act / obligation, a signifier of his prowess and not vice versa, and that women have no control over such actions. In other words, Gusii women are imaged as passive and "empty vessels to be filled" (Shahjahan, et al., 2015, p.705) and/or banks into which pregnancy is "deposited or infused" (Merriam & Bierema 2014, p.36), thereby presenting them as inactive persons in the love and life-making processes. However, notice that this perception coheres with the wider societal view, where for instance, Sprock (2012: 6) confirms that "Men in Nairobi are expected to be initiators and achievers in sexual encounters." In this regard, Ekegusii language reflects women as the direct target of man's actions, hence emphasizing man's capacity for agentive action, to affect another entity-woman (Machin & Mayr, 2012: 129). This presupposes that women and girls are passive beings that depend on men for direction. From the perspective of Fairclough's (2013) concepts of hegemony and power struggles, the aforementioned portrayal serves to make men's role and power conspicuous, compared to that of women.

However, while the aforementioned generalization is based on underlying stereotypical beliefs about how women become pregnant and have children, such stereotypes overlook the fact that some women choose not to have children" (Lassen, 2011: 260), hence why this language behaviour specific to gender cannot be sustained. Furthermore, this explains why Wodak (2001: 10) emphasizes the need for a critical approach to create awareness in agents, regarding how they are blinded about their own needs and interests in society.

4.1.2. Ekegusii Naming System

In Ekegusii, a number of common nouns are discursively used. These are discussed below:

Example VI

Egesagane (a lass)

The word *egesagane* (a lass), is deployed by the Gusii people to suggest an uncircumcised young girl. In this regard, a man who displays feminine characteristics is normally rebuked by other men: *Aye negesagane* (you are a lass). This implies an inferior being. *Egesagane* (a lass), is the opposite of *omoisia* (a lad) discussed below, though if one refers to his contemporary and / or playmate: *aye nomoisia* (you are a lad), it does not sound that abusive and ridiculous as being told: *aye negesagane* (you are a lass). This stance was echoed in one of the girl's response: "*egesagane has a negative connotation. It is an abusive name while omoisia is used to raise and cheer up young boys especially when they achieve something.*" The negative evaluation of girls, in effect serves to present women as being subordinate to men:

Amarieta ande yekegusii giiito nigo agochecheria omoiseke nakogera okina kagendererete kweigwa otarengaini na otaisani gotiemanan na abamura - egekogera ayio nigo are mamincha yechimbachero chia Abagusii (Some of our terminologies in Ekegusii language undermine the girl child and make her to grow up with an inferior mind, thinking that she cannot compete favourably with boys because it is against their culture to do so)

It is in this sense that Verga (2010: 34) emphasizes the fact that "the language of one character, not only points to the way that character sees herself and the outside world, but also uniquely identifies its personality."

In this way, our linguistic investigation of gendered discourses sought to reveal that the use of Ekegusii nouns has the potential to inculcate the belief in many girls and young women that hard work, diligence and commitment are male attributes, hence their relaxation and lack of ambition for success in society. In this regard, the term *egesagane* (a lass) is discursively used to reflect girls as being inferior to boys in society.

Example VII

Omoisia (a lad)

People in the Gusii society use the term *omoisia* (a lad) to mean a young uncircumcised boy. However, *omoisia* is used in a positive sense compared to its direct equivalent *egesagane* (a lass), which is negatively used to refer to a young girl. That is, the word *Omoisia* (a lad) is deployed to imply an achiever, hence a term of honour. This explains why it is common to hear both boys and girls affirming: *inje nomoisia omobe, natoboire* (I am a tough / bad lad, I have made it);

and not *inje negesagane ekebe natoboire* (I am a bad girl, I have made it). In other words, when the equivalent term for *Omoisia* (a lad) is invoked, it carries negative connotations, hence, the loss of vigour and aggressiveness associated with *Omoisia* (a lad). Thus, the term *egesagane* (a lass) above, is negatively used to refer to women and girls, whereas *Omoisia* (a lad), is positively used to reflect boys' or men's achievements in society. Likewise, the term *omoisia* (a lad) is also given prominence over its direct equivalent in Ekegusii language *egesagane* (a lass), used to refer to girls. In this respect, *omoisia* is used positively to suggest an achiever and conqueror, hence, making boys more recognizable than girls. Therefore, if one tells you: *aye nomoisia* (you are a lad), you can't feel offended as when one remarks: *aye negesagane* (you are a lass), which is the direct equivalent of *Omoisia* (a lad) in Ekegusii language. The reference *Omoisia* (a lad), therefore gives boys credit even where they do not deserve. On the other hand, the term *egesagane* is used to suggest an inferior person. Notice that this mode of using language was found to affect the Gusii girls' way of thinking. This became evident from one of the informants, who argued that:

Ekeru nanyorire esabu ekerasi ime, nigo ingokuura neriogi inga inche omoisia nayenyorire. Tingoteba inga, inche egesagane nayenyorire, egekogera goteba igo nigo gokogera naigwa in neramire inche omonyene koba egesagane (Whenever I score or get a sum right in class, I do shout, I the lad have got it right. I can't say: I the lass have scored or got it right because by saying so, I strongly feel like I have abused myself as a lass)

The extract above not only reveals the Gusii girl in question as a victim of split/torn identity/self, but also the fact that "The degree to which a particular language handles gender can also affect the way one thinks" (Smith & Bond, 2003: 52). Further, it is worth mentioning here that the aforesaid girl's warped thinking and evaluation of herself using language is the result of the different ways in which boys and girls are treated in the Gusii speech community; this is also indicative of the different forms and faces of inequality (Lassen 2011) among the Gusii girls. From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis, it can be argued that as members of the Gusii speech community, girls are "constituted in and by the available discourses" and that these discourses speak through them (Janks, 1997: 338). Based on these observations, therefore, the aforesaid explains how the Gusii people unconsciously categorise girls and women by applying stereotypical thinking to them (Goethals, 2003: 17), but with little regard to the fact that such stereotypes do affect their perceptions and view of the world. It is in this sense that Mills and Mullany (2011: 3) emphasize that: "We do the research we do in order to change the way that women and men think about the language that they use and the way that others represent women and men in language; ultimately this has an impact on the way that women and men are treated and the way that they think about themselves."

Example VIII

Omosacha (a man)

The term *Omosacha* (a man) is derived from the verb *sacha* which in Ekegusii language means to fend for. In this regard, the Gusii people use the term *Omosacha* discursively to mean the person who goes out to search for property. This implies that men in the Gusii community are supposed to actively and proactively search for food to help meet and enhance their families' social needs. If a woman displays masculine qualities, however, she is labeled *Omosacha*, which is a mark of honour. In this context, whenever a woman succeeds in a task deemed tough and laborious, it is common for her to affirm: *Inje nomosacha* (I am a man). This reveals how girls and women's linguistic behaviour is constrained by forces operating within their context of situation; it further shows how women's gendered sociolinguistic identities are formed and expanded.

From Huckin's (2002) perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis, the discursive use of the discourse strategy of foregrounding and backgrounding in the context of Ekegusii common nouns deserves a mention. That is, foregrounding and backgrounding devices are commonly used with Ekegusii common nouns, largely to foreground man, thereby giving him prominence over woman. For instance, as stated above, *Omosacha* (a man), is discursively used in Ekegusii language to suggest the one who goes to search for something (probably food), thereby foregrounding his role. On the other hand, *Omokungu* (a woman) in Ekegusii language means a wife and protector, for example, one who receives and surrounds that which has been brought home by man. The placement of man in the subject position and woman in the object position above (the agent-patient relations (Huckin 2002), is meant to influence the reader's and/or listener's perception of the idea that, it is men who initiate actions (and thus, exerting power) over women (passive recipients of those actions).

Example IX

Omokungu (a woman)

The term *Omokungu* in Ekegusii language means a woman. It derives from the Swahili word *kunga* (Aberi, 2009), which means to protect and/or surround that which has been acquired and/or obtained, and in this case by her husband. In this respect, if a man wants to rebuke another man for purposes of belittling him, he can say: *Aye mbosa, aye nomokungu* (you are nothing, in fact, you are a woman). Thus, even fellow women do not refer to one another as; *omokungu oyo!* (you woman!), because, the reference *Omokungu* is a belittling term that is discursively used to downplay women's status in the Gusii speech community. That is, the positioning of man in Ekegusii language as the searcher and woman as the protector of that which has been acquired is one way of giving men prominence (foregrounding) over women, i.e., it is man who first acquires that which the woman has to protect. This explains why it is common to hear the Gusii men and women remarking: *Omosacha noyo gosacha, nomokungu noyo gokunga etugo* (a man is meant to search for wealth, while a woman is meant to protect wealth). In this way, the Gusii woman is presented as a *passive* recipient that surrounds

what man brings home; her role in searching for food and wealth is technically backgrounded. This presents the top-down orientation of their social position in the Gusii speech community. Based on Huckin's (2002) and Saarinen's (2008) concept of presuppositions mentioned above, the aforesaid Ekegusii framing style presupposes that a woman is subordinate to a man, because, without a man, she could not find something to protect (presumably, food). This view is well illustrated by one of the respondents, who argued that:

Amarieta ande aito ase omonua bwekegusii nigo agochecheria omwana omoiseke nakomokora okina nebirengereio biogotenyara, nakorengereria inga ere tagotiemana boronge na abumura, ekiagera eyio nigo ere mamincha yechinchera chiabagusii (Some of our terminologies in Ekegusii language undermine the girl child and make her to grow up with an inferior mind, thinking that she cannot compete favourably with boys because it is against their culture to do so).

In line with Fairclough's concept of hegemonic power (Fairclough 1995), the construction above can be said to give prominence to man's power as the provider of woman's livelihood. This understanding coheres closely with TJRC, Kenya's (2013) view, that Kenya is predominantly a patriarchal society, with masculinity deeply rooted in the cultural practices of its communities. For example, the TJRC, Kenya highlights naming conventions among the Agikuyu people, noting that a comparison of gender-related vocabulary in the Kikuyu language shows that the term for man, "mundumurume," derives from "urume," meaning extremely courageous, while "mutumia" (woman) comes from "tumia," which means to 'shut up' or tolerate. Consequently, similar to the Gusii people, "men from the Kikuyu ethnic community not only view themselves as the dominant sex, but also see women as existing primarily for their benefit" (TJRC, Kenya, 2013: 19).

Example X

Omorugi (a wife)

The Gusii people use the term *omorugi* (a wife/cook) to mean a wife and somebody who cooks for her husband. This suggests that a woman's key role is to cook for her husband. Furthermore, the majority of women in the Gusii speech community naively affirm: *Inje nomorugi oye* (I am his wife/cook). This communicates the idea that a woman is somebody's wife, hence a person occupying a lower rank in society, compared to her husband. Notice that the act of cooking among the Gusii is a demeaning task, and one that is lowly rated and largely attributed to women. In this context, it is unexpected for a man to say, for instance, **Inje nomorugi o'Mary*. (I am Mary's wife/cook). This is in view of the fact that the term *Omorugi* (a wife or cook), is exclusively used in relation to women, and purposely to suggest that the sole role of a woman is to cook for her husband and children. From the perspective of Huckin's (1997) and Sarinen's (2008) concept of presupposition discussed above, the Gusii people could be said to be using the term *Omorugi* discursively to give men prominence, while at the same time back grounding women as being inferior to men. It is in this sense that Huckin (1997: 101) emphasizes that: "Presuppositions are notoriously manipulative because they are difficult to challenge: many readers are reluctant to question statements that the author appears to be taking for granted" (Huckin, 1997: 101).

5. Contributions of the study

The study illuminates how the use of sexualized Ekegusii transitive verbs and common nouns reinforces patriarchal norms, portraying women as passive and subordinate. By revealing the linguistic mechanisms that shape the self-concept and worldview of Gusii girls, the study provides valuable insights into the interplay between language and gender dynamics. In addition, the study emphasizes the necessity for critical awareness among girls and young women regarding the discursive practices that affect their identities, advocating for educational interventions aimed at fostering empowerment. More significantly, the study makes significant contributions to the fields of linguistics, gender studies, and to the broader discourse on language as a tool of social control, thereby highlighting the importance of challenging and transforming oppressive linguistic structures to promote gender equality in the Gusii community and beyond.

6. Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, it was observed that Ekegusii verbs are largely used discursively to present women as persons whose actions are initiated and controlled by men (see examples 1-5 above). From the perspective of Fairclough's (2003) notion of agency, it was noted that Gusii men are heavily topicalized in Ekegusii language, thereby denying women much power. This was seen from the varied ways in which, "agent-patient relations" (Huckin 2002) were depicted in Ekegusii, where it was noted, that in almost all of the cases discussed herein, men are the ones initiating actions, while women are at the receiving end of the participation continuum. In line with Janks (1997) and Machin and Mayr's (2012) concept of passivization, the Gusii girls can be said to be imaged as having no agency, probably, to ensure that the text producers (patriarchal forces) continue to exert some control over their (girls') behaviour, though subtly; women are herein constructed as incapable of taking care of themselves to perpetuate the feeling of incapacity, hence their sense of insecurity without man's support. Notice, however, that given the changing social world, the research subject's identity and "sense of power and agency" (Duff 2018), the aforementioned manipulative sequencing of events in Ekegusii language is slowly becoming the precise opposite of the actual flow of events, considering that many women are currently independent and consistently in charge of their own lives.

Concerning common nouns, it was found out that Ekegusii common nouns are commonly used to present men as able achievers, while women and girls are presented negatively as powerless and inferior persons that depend on men for their survival (see examples 6-10). From Fairclough's (2003) notion of ideology, this usage of common nouns is arguably

meant to image women and girls as not being in control of issues affecting them in society, more so, their active participation in the mainstream activities in society.

Along with the statistical information/findings above indicating that 75.2% of the respondents believed the discursive use of Ekegusii verbs and common nouns serve to distort, and thus impairing the Gusii girls' self-image and worldview, the study results discussed above strongly indicate that the need to uncover part of the untold stories of the how gendered languages in Kenya continue to treat boys and girls differently, thereby continuing to pose difficulties to their efforts to participate in the public domain of their life on equal terms with men.

Considering that "meanings that people make are not only constrained by the language they know but also by the social group or community they belong to" (Widdowson, 2007: xv), it is important that urgent steps be taken to make women and young girls aware of the need to be critical to the use of Ekegusii language, that is in this case responsible for engendering their girls' warped self-concept and world view. This will, in effect, help the Gusii girls to extend their modes of thinking, by widening their image of the self, beyond the existing/constraining stereotypical images to embrace new ideas of the world and themselves. This is in line with Fairclough's (1992; 1995) model of CDA adopted for this study, that advocates the need to raise people's (and in this case girls') awareness and sense of self reflection, thereby contributing "to the wider struggle against unjust and oppressive gender relations" (Cameron, 2007: 16) in society

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