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Gender diglossia and its maintenance among the Ubang

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Ubang, a Bendi language spoken in Obudu, Nigeria, has gender-based language varieties whereby different terms are used for certain basic items in female and male speech forms. For instance, “okwakwe” and “abu” are respective female and male words for ‘dog’. There are also gendered nuances in the use of vowels and tone. Apparently, the non-cognate gender-differentiated lexicon derives from genetic differences; while the dual-sex disparities observed in cognate words arguably stem from the conscious attitude of polarisation, whereby male and female folks intentionally sound different. This gender-based dual-sex language pervades all domains of human activity. Hence, a diglossic situation exists prima facie, whereby each gender uses its own variety consistently, regardless of whether the discussants are of the same or opposite gender. This paper adopts a socio-cognitive framework and an ethnographic design to investigate the diglossic nature of Ubang gender speech, as well as identify the ethno-cultural factors responsible for its sustenance and intergenerational transfer. While the gender diglossic nature of Ubang was illustrated, it was found that the shared knowledge of Ubang dual-sex speech is premised on a common ground of polarisation established by lore and fostered through social agentive factors such as parental linguistic role, workplace regimes, table etiquette, age-group censorship and the mutual demotion of the other gender variety.

Keywords: Ubang gender diglossia, Gender dialect, Gender speech domain, Mutual demotion, Polar-farming.

INTRODUCTION

Obudu, Cross River, Nigeria has been famous for its breath-taking cattle ranch, while its equally spectacular human phenomenon, the gender differentiated Ubang language, was scarcely known until recent media reports (Vanguard, 2014; BBC News, 2018). Blench (2001), an earlier report on Bendi, credits Umoh (1989) of the Sunday Champion newspaper for a dual-sex wordlist of Ubang. Indeed, there is a remarkable gender-based

dichotomy in the expression of certain vocabulary items and concepts in Ubang. Whereas gender in languages usually resides in the signified (object being called), in Ubang, it inheres in the signifier (the word) and the speaker. Unlike languages with gender in morphology, where referents are assigned abstract gender and given corresponding female or male word forms in (pro) nouns and adjectives, referents in Ubang are gender neutral, yet

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the words used to refer to them align with the gender of the speaker. This phenomenon is sustained by ethno-cultural factors which emphasise gender exclusivity, such as polar-farming.

Scholars have investigated Ubang from the perspective of linguistic gender-differentiation and the anthropology of gender and power. Ugwu (2016)'s thesis had the main objectives of verifying the gender dichotomy of Ubang and identifying the specific differences. It provides elaborate data demonstrating the gender-specificities in lexicon, syntax and semantics. The lexical gender-differentiations are most pronounced; and working from a descriptive perspective, he presents basic and cultural vocabulary such as body parts, the physical environment, flora and fauna. These highlight gender differences in cognate and non-cognate words. The strategies deployed in lexical gender-differentiation are vowel substitution, diphthongisation and the semantic deployment of different notions to convey the same concept. These exemplifications satisfy the objectives of the study since they robustly demonstrate the dual-sex linguistic features of the Ubang. However, the formal definition of the linguistic status of Ubang dual-sex speech and the factors for its sustenance were beyond the scope of Ugwu's study.

Uchendu (2013) approached the Ubang from the perspective of gender equity and empowerment. Her anthropological study outlines a consistent correspondence between cultural perspectives and gender equality. By linking Ubang gender-language differentiation to socio-cultural behaviour, Uchendu opines that the Ubang gender-laced language phenomenon is a product of the dual-sex culture, whereby females and males practically operate in physically exclusive worlds. This study agrees with Uchendu's dual-sex cultural and physical exclusion perspective as it concerns the maintenance of gender-differentiation but not as a source of the dual-sex language phenomenon. It therefore elaborates on the factors of maintenance.

Given that the Ubang dual-sex speech is not bilingualism, the closest phenomenon to it is diglossia. However, existing literature on diglossia preclude a gender domain. Hence, this paper attempts to situate the gender domain as demonstrated in Ubang within diglossic scholarship. It also seeks to highlight the agentive customs and lifestyles that ensure the preservation of the *dual-sex languaging*. Thus, socio-cognitive and ethnographic means were deployed to pursue the following specific objectives: i) Illustrate the features of Ubang gender-based language differentiation; ii) Determine the linguistic status of the male and female varieties (via lexicostatistics); iii) Ascertain if Ubang gender-differentiation is diglossia; and iv) Identify the ethno-cultural agentive factors which drive the maintenance of gender differentiation among the Ubang. Before pursuing these objectives, we would presently situate Ubang among its linguistic relatives.

Ubang and the Bendi Languages

Ubang belongs to the Bendi node of East Benue-Congo, which has striking lexical similarities with the Ekoid of Southern Bantoid (Blench, 2009). Hence, its current classification is tentative. It is spoken in the northern parts of Cross-River State in the south-eastern Nigeria border with Cameroun. Its less than 1500 speakers live in three communities in Obudu Local Government Area, namely Ikiro, Ofambe and Okweriseng (Figure 1). Lore has it that the villages are named after three progenitor brothers, the eldest of which was Ikiro, and the youngest, Ofambe. As such, the king of Ikiro is considered the most senior of the monarchs in the three communities.

The Ubang are surrounded by speakers of three closely related Bendi languages – Ukpe, Alege and Bete – any of which is deployed as L₂ by the Ubang (Eberhard et al., 2019), though the Ubang claim a mono-directional intelligibility whereby only the Ubang understand these related languages. In addition, there is English, which is the language of education. Despite jointly hosting markets with speakers of enviroing languages, the dual-sex speech phenomenon is unique to the Ubang.

Going by various scholarly classifications (Williamson and Shimizu, 1968; Williamson, 1989; Connell, 1998; Blench, 2001), there are 12 to 15 Bendi languages. Blench (2001: 23) opines that, but for socio-political considerations, "Bendi forms a distinctive, tightly knit group; indeed the languages are so close to one another that they could be treated as lects of a single language". This assertion seems true save for Bekwara, the largest group of Bendi. Taken wholesale, the Bendi languages constitute a minority set among Nigeria's array of over 500 hundred languages. Hence, the languages have been minimally standardised, and the people claim political marginalisation. Blench (2001) synthesises scholarship on Bendi classification and identifies some features emblematic of Bendi languages. Some of these features shared by Ubang include singular/plural suppletion in nouns; a minimal use of nasal prefixes; and the conservative retention of Niger-Congo roots; otherwise, they jointly innovate similar roots. It was also found, as Table 1 shows, that Bendi languages (save Bekwara and Bete) operate a base-five numeral system with ordinal numbers one to five and ten being non-derived and numbers six to nine being derived from the doubling of three and four (for 6 and 8) and additions to five (for 7 and 9).

Despite the close cultural affinity of the Bendi languages, Ubang is an isolate regarding lexical distinctions in male and female speech.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This part of the study shows the chronicles of the research framework and design for the study, as well as the procedures for the acquisition, management and analyses of data.



Figure 1. Location of Ubang in Cross River Nigeria.

Table 1. Basic numeral system of three Bendi languages.

	One	Two	Three	Four	Five	Six 3+3	Seven 5+2	Eight 4+4	Nine 5+4	ten
Alege	Úbõ	Éfɛ	Èkɛ	Éne	Ékaŋ	Ékeke	Ékanéfe	Enéne	Ékanéne	Dékue
Bumaji	Ibo	Ufije	Utija	Unea	Uton	Utitija	Utounife	Uneune	Utounune	Rikuo
Ubang (m.)	Keŋ	Befe	Bika	Bini	Besaŋ	Bikabika	Besanbefe	Binibin	Besaŋbeni	Rukwe
Ubang (f.)	Kibaŋ	Befe	Bikje	Bene	Besaŋ	Bikabika	Besanbefe	Benebene	Besanbene	Rukwe

Research framework and design

The study was anchored on the socio-cognitive discourse approach complemented with lexicostatistics, while an ethnographic design was used. Socio-cognitive discourse (SCD) is an aspect of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak, 2009) which entails a critical description of the mental aspects of the language use (van Dijk, 2008, 2018).

It was applied to gender-languaging to investigate the communicative common grounds – shared knowledge, notions and beliefs – which inform the attitudes and ideologies of Ubang dual-sex language users. By so doing, SCD helped to relate the collective cognitive operations of the people with their linguistic social constructs. It is held that cognitive interfaces such as

attitudes, ideologies, norms and values determine discourse structures. Hence, SCD was deployed to illustrate how mental models, notions and beliefs have mediated gender-based linguistic differentiation among the Ubang.

As proposed by Swadesh (1952), one of the functions of lexicostatistics is to determine the genetic affiliation of languages based on the percentage cognate relatedness of basic vocabulary items. In comparative historical linguistics, basic vocabulary is understood as a body of universally relevant items for which native words can be found in every language (Hock, 2021:215). Hence, such expressions are unlikely to be loanwords. Lexicostatistics was applied to determine the linguistic status of the gender-based varieties of Ubang.

The ethnographic design is a qualitative procedure by which

cultural phenomena are observed while the researcher lives *in-situ* with the natives who practise the phenomena. By so doing, the researcher gets integrated in the community.

This comes with the advantage of being a participant or non-participant observer, who can make insider judgements about cultural practices (Malinowski, 1922; Sanjek, 2002; Dewan, 2018). The ethnographic design admits of multimodal data acquisition methods. In this study, people lived among Ubang natives for two months, during which we undertook naturalistic audio-visual recording of Ubang daily life; conducted in-depth interviews and focus group discussions; elicited basic and non-basic vocabulary and made copious field notes from observation. The sole purpose of the ethnographic interactions was to identify the socio-cognitive underpinnings of Ubang dual-sex speech and discover the ethno cultural agents for its maintenance.

Data acquisition

A fieldtrip lasting two months (but 43 days of actual fieldwork) was carried out in Ubang and environing communities in 2019 for the purpose of documenting the Ubang language and culture. Three secondary school teachers, natives of Ubang, were purposively engaged as the main language consultants (two males and the only native female teacher in the secondary school at the time). These language consultants doubled as interpreters for non-English speaking Ubang natives. Informed consent was sought and got from community heads and native speakers.

Data were acquired naturalistically by observation and direct elicitation in audio-visual format. Naturalistic data included cultural and occupational activities such as traditional court sessions, age-group meetings, farming, mealtime, market sales, worship and storytelling sessions. This genre of data was got with the intention of open-source archiving for the benefit of multidisciplinary research. Elicited data comprised of the acquisition of wordlists and syntactic data sheets, structured interviews and focus group discussions. Elicited data were acquired using 1500 words from the Comparative Wordlist for Africa (CWA) of Summer Institute of Linguistics; the Ibadan 400 Wordlist (I400W), the Ibadan Syntactic Paradigm Sheet (ISPS) and the revised Swadesh 200 Wordlist. While the CWA, I400W and ISPS were scoured for variations between male and female speech, the Swadesh 200 Wordlist was used for cognation counts to determine the status of the gender varieties as dialects or distinct languages.

Nine structured in-depth-interviews (IDIs) were held with community heads (3) and the eldest male and female in each the three communities (6), to interrogate the customs and practices responsible for the maintenance of gender-differentiation in the language. These were supplemented with 6 focus group discussions (FGDs) – purposively selected gatherings of 8 to 12 people from similar backgrounds or experiences to discuss Ubang dual-sex speech. The FGDs were convened based on gender and age – two each with teenagers (1 female, 1 male group), adults (1 male, 1 female group) and the aged (1 male, 1 female group). The IDIs and FDGs revealed the trans-generational socio-cultural behaviours which foster linguistic gender-differentiation amount the Ubang. Ethnographic field notes were also obtained from the (non) participant observation during cultural events such as farming, family life and traditional court hearings, mealtime and market sessions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research procedure

Selected naturalistic and elicited data were first

annotated and glossed in ELAN with interlinear translation assistance from the native consultants. Male and female wordlists and syntactic data were observed for gender differences. Once established, the gender differentiations were categorised and compared with previous scholarship; after which, samplers of such differences were tabulated and commented on. A lexicostatistical count of cognates from the Swadesh 200 Wordlist (adapted) was then done between the female and male varieties. The lexicostatistical count was done in three tiers. We first found out the inter-gender cognation percentage between the female and male speech forms in each of the three Ubang communities: Ofambe, Okweriseng and Okiro. The second stage was the calculation of the intra-gender cognate percentages for male speech across the three communities. Finally, it was calculated that the intra-gender cognate percentages for female speech across the three communities. Statistical results were then subjected to the comparative analysis.

Having determined the linguistic status of the two varieties, the author set out to ascertain the diglossic status by assessing the domains of usage and inferior or superior social status of each variety. Finally, we carried out an interpretive analysis of the ethnographic data: interviews, FGDs and field notes, to tease out the socio-cognitive myths, ideologies and norms that interface the gender-languaging among the Ubang.

Ubang gender-based language differentiation

In line with the first objective of the study, this part of the study provides a snapshot illustration of Ubang's gender-language in basic vocabulary, which includes basic nouns, adjectives, verbs and domestic terms. Aside from non-cognate differentiations, there are gender-based tonal and sound alternations, as well as metathesis in cognate words.

Gender in basic nouns

Table 2 contains some nouns in which there are clear gender distinctive words for each item. The distinctions therein are fundamental since they obscure cognation, and there are no obvious historical or etymological traces relating their meanings. In fact, the table contains words referred to in historical linguistics as basic to every language, thus not likely to be borrowed. For instance, it is a given that every language has native names for body parts, which makes it less necessary to borrow words for them. Despite that, as Table 2 shows, the male and female forms for many body parts in Ubang are fundamentally different.

The fact that the words for fundamentals like “water” and “tree”, and intimate terms like “testicles” are different

Table 2. Some gender-based non-cognate basic nouns in Ubang.

S/N	Noun	Male	Female
1.	Ankle	ĪKpó	MĪGrāBá
2.	Cheek	Bímbà	BĪKá
3.	Chest	RĪTé	Àkòm
4.	Forest	Rìsò	Àbiàn
5.	Fruit	Ók ^w én	Kijirèm
6.	Leg	Òfiè	ŌKpó
7.	Mouth	ŌTúm	Ònù
8.	Neck	ŌMé:	Òdèm
9.	Night	Rìtjúí	Ụtụ
10.	One	Ken	Òbó:n
11.	Road	Mgbák ^w i	Óbú
12.	Skull	Òlèbátúà	Ríkúà
13.	Stick	Kitjí	Òk ^w é
14.	Testicle	ÍfōḌ	ŌSÍ
15.	Thigh	Kùnàṅ	BōKpúkú
16.	Tree	Kitjí	Òsí
17.	Water	Ámùjé	Bámú

for females and males is a clear pointer to the extent of Ubang gender differentiation. Each gender uses its own variety in all contexts. It is for this reason that native speakers make the claim that there are two different Ubang languages, one for females and the other for males. While lexical distinctions alone may not warrant the recognition of two gender-based languages; it is yet obvious that dual-sex languaging operates among the Ubang. The situation seems to be diglossic since the gendered differences are observed largely in lexicon, while male and female grammatical strategies remain substantially the same. The linguistic status of the two forms will be investigated later on in this paper.

Gender in basic adjectives

As would be expected, due to the grammatical connection with nouns, there is a lot of gender differentiation in the use of adjectives in Ubang. Table 3 illustrates female and male words for common adjectives. It is interesting to note that basic adjectival opposites like “warm” and “cold”, “wet” and “dry” have dual-sex forms.

Gender in basic verbs

Another interesting perspective to Ubang gender differentiation is the observation that the disaggregation of vocabulary is extended beyond its occurrence in many other languages. The situation widely reported is that inherent gender is conveyed basically in components of

Table 3. Some gender-based non-cognate basic adjectives in Ubang.

S/N	Adjective	Male	Female
1.	Dull	Tò	Júón
2.	Straight	Kpò	Drè
3.	Black	Iji Iji	Kpon
4.	Warm	Wèwè	Σiè
5.	Cold	Kpàtiá	Ìk ^w èn
6.	Wet	Tjúò Tjúò	Bé:n Bé:n
7.	Dry	Gere Gere	Kinjim
8.	Near	Nùrè:	Kpòkpò

the noun phrase - nouns, pronouns and adjectives. French, for instance, conveys gender by inflectional adaptations on (pro) nouns, gender-based adjectives and determiners, or mere silent orthography as in *l'étudiante/l'étudiant* (student, f/m), *ravi/ravie* (delight, m/f), *fiancé/fiancée* (fiancé, m/f), respectively. While phenomena like these – save silent orthography – are instantiated in Ubang male and female speech (NB: not intrinsic to referents), they are also quite exotically extended to verbs and tonal patterns. Consider the non-cognate verb in Table 4.

It is evident from Table 4 that verbal gender disaggregation in Ubang affects basic regular verbs used in everyday conversation. The fact that words for such commonplace verbs as “look” and “sleep” differ on gender grounds further underscores the exquisite gender subtlety of Ubang. In a sense, people are used to things, animate and inanimate, having nominal gender, but the Ubang also ascribe adherent gender to actions. Yet a point to note is that gender-marking in verbs (or nouns and adjectives for that matter) is not restricted to inflection or suffixation; rather it often manifests as dissimilar and non-cognate words.

Gender in domestic terms

One of the first things to strike a visitor about the dual-sex speech of Ubang is the use of gender distinguishing terms for domesticated animals like cock, dog and goat (Table 5). Even basic greetings like “Good morning” and staple foods like “yam” have male and female forms. Whereas these differences do not qualify the male and female varieties as separate languages, they certainly indicate that the two forms may have originated from different, albeit related, languages.

Gender-driven vowel and tonal alternations

Aside from assigning gender to non-cognate words, another way in which words are gender-marked is by

Table 4. Some gender-based non-cognate verbs in Ubang.

S/N	Item	Male	Female
1.	Bleed	Víéné	Wúbàrũ
2.	Chew	Zí	Kwǒ̀ŋ
3.	Dance	Kúnó	Ànò
4.	Look	Tù	Rè
5.	Notice	Íritǎ̀ŋ	Níè
6.	Perspire	ŌWúrí	KwíàwũBē
7.	Run	Kòtié	Ásié
8.	Say	Dù	Rù
9.	Shiver	Nò	Tjìò
10.	Sleep	Rí:Síé	Mũ:Rè
11.	Wipe	Kò	Gbrè

Table 5. Some gender-based domestic terms in Ubang.

S/N	Gloss	Male	Female
1.	Good morning	Àmúrí	Ànjímì
2.	Dog	Àbú	Òk ^w á:k ^w é
3.	Cock	Kùjé	K ^w ó:
4.	Goat	Ìbújè	Òbí:
5.	Yam	Kìton	Ìrùí

Table 6. Alternation i~e in Ubang.

S/N	Gloss	Male	Female
1.	Eye	Àsè	Àsi
2.	Nose	Rèdzí	Rìdzúi
3.	Tongue	RēBē	RīBē
4.	Palate	ĀLēLô:	ĀLīLô:
5.	Stomach	Réfò	Rífò ¹
6.	Vagina	RēTsô:	RīTjîè
7.	Taste	Márè	Mári
8.	Axe	RēKá	RīKá

vowel alternation. This usually occurs in near-identical words. The way vowel alternation occurs in Ubang is that vowels which persist in male words are consistently replaced in female cognate versions, to the extent that the two words concerned constitute a minimal or near minimal pair. Since the alternation is regular, it could be referred to as a systematic correspondence of vowels across genders.

Table 6 shows how females substitute the [i] in male version of words with [e]. This occurs usually after alveolar continuants. This is by far the most common gender-based vowel alternation in Ubang. For each item, the pair of words has identical segmental and tonal sequences except for the substitution of [e] and [i]. It

should also be noted in passing that there are consonant alternations such as between [ts] and [tj] in the word for item 6, “vagina”. Such consonantal alternations need further instantiations.

Yet another attested form of lexical gender manifestation in Ubang is tonal alternation. In certain words, tonal melody polarises across male and female speech. Tonal polarisation is used here in the sense that tones in specific syllables of cognate words consistently differ in female and male versions. This gender-based tonal opposition is usually between low and high tones, such that where the male use high tone, the females substitute with a low tone and vice versa (Table 7). Tonal polarisation is replete after the first syllable of words

Table 7. Tonal alternation non-initial syllables.

S/N	Gloss	Male	Female
1.	Bone	Ìkébé	ìkébè
2.	Boil	Íntfùè	Íntfùé
3.	Grinding stone	KōKárió	ŌKíariò
4.	Swim	Ñkènè	Ñkèné
5.	Sun	Ìjúi	ìjùi
6.	Yesterday	Óhùjè	Óhùjé
7.	Heart	Ríté	Rítê
8.	Year	Ridé	Rítê

Table 8. Metathesis and coalescence in Ubang.

S/N	Gloss	Male	Female
1.	Rubbish	KɪKpíkɔ́mÉtiti	Étiti:kɔ́pò̀m
2.	Lip	ÌKwɔ́Tùm	ÌKwóɲù
3.	Cut down	(Ke)TùSē	JǒDwúésé
4.	Notice	Íritò	Ñìè

and has not been found in monosyllabic words.

It should be noticed in Table 7 that there is a *versa versa* effect in Ubang tonal polarisation, such that no specific tone may be ascribed to a gender. Rather, either of male or female gender could take high tone where the other gender presents a low, and the reverse could be the case in another word, in the fashion α/α . In the item 'boil', for instance, males use a low tone in the second syllable, while females use a high tone, while there is a reverse tonal pattern for 'grinding stone'. It remains to be determined which one of the genders retains the original tone and what happens when these polarised tones in words in isolation interact in phrase with other words. Likely however, the polarity of tone may be borne out of a socio-cognitive effort to distinguish the speech form of a gender from the other.

Gender-driven metathesis cum coalescence in Ubang

There is proven syllabic and morphemic metathesis in Ubang, which is also speaker-gender motivated. It takes the pattern of permutation of sounds like castling in a game of chess. In Table 8, metathesis is most obvious in the first item, 'rubbish', where the last morpheme, *étiti* in the male form is realised in the word initial position in the female form.

Data in Table 8 make it evident that metathesis often comes with a change of sound shape or outright merger of sounds within the affected syllables, some kind of coalescence. In the word 'lip' for instance, it is apparent that the ultimate nasal [m] and the penultimate vowel in

the male word swap places in the female version. However, the place of the consonant changes from bilabial to palato-alveolar; and it would seem that the antepenultimate alveolar plosive is deleted. A similar kind of metathesis occurs in the verb 'cut down', where a nasal vowel [ɔ́] trades places with the oral vowel [u]. Upon metathesis, a velar nasal is inserted between [ɔ́] and [u] and the alveolar plosive [t] again disappears. The pattern is much the same in the word 'notice' where penultimate vowel and ultimate nasal also exchange position, with the disappearance of the preceding alveolar plosive. There are two viable immediate explanations for this occurrence. The simple one is that the alveolar plosive simply deletes after metathesis to avoid an unacceptable cluster of plosive and nasal (i.e., CN) in the language. The more complex explanation is that the plosive and nasal coalesce upon metathesis to form a nasal of another place, also to avoid an unlicensed consonant cluster. Bearing in mind that our present concern is to illustrate gender-inspired metathesis, we stick to the Occam's razor by opting for the simpler explanation. However, the most curious detail about this phenomenon is that it points out the fact that female and male speech, though co-temporal and cohabiting, manifest opposite patterns of innovation, even with cognate words. We posit that this occurs because the two genders explicitly decide on different linguistic paths, to consolidate their dual-sex speech.

Caveat on gender dichotomy

Some notes of caution are in order at the end of this part of the study. The first is that the reader should by no means go with the impression that every word in Ubang is disaggregated for gender. That is not the case. In fact, easily 65% of Ubang vocabulary is composed of unisex words. The word unisex is used here to underscore the point that the gender of a word is adherent that is, premised on the gender of the speaker and not on the state of the thing being called.

In addition, it should be stressed that the *engendered* terms are not synonyms that could be used freely by male or female speakers. No, only females use the female terms; and only males use the male terms even when speaking with the opposite gender. The crux of this paper, however, is not on the lexical-dichotomy but on gender diglossic status of Ubang and social context of its preservation – our next focus.

The linguistic status of male and female varieties

Regarding the claim that the male and female varieties of Ubang are two distinctive languages, it was conducted that a lexicostatistic count of cognate basic vocabulary in the three communities where Ubang is spoken – Okiro, Ofambe and Okweriseng. This was done at three levels

Table 9. Ubang inter-gender cognation.

	%	Average %
Ofambe Female/Male	80	
Okweriseng Female/Male	82	
Okiro Female/Male	90	84

Table 10. Ubang intra-female cognation.

	Ofambe female	Okweriseng female	Average
Okweriseng Female	78		
Okiro Female	89	77	81

Table 11. Ubang intra-male cognation.

	Ofambe male	Okweriseng male	Average
Okweriseng Male	89		
Okiro Male	90	85	88

using the Swadesh 100 Wordlist. The first cognation count was an inter-gender count in each Ubang community. Table 9 shows that the inter-gender cognation of Okiro is the highest (90%).

This implies that irrespective of gender variation, 90% of basic lexicon between the female and the male varieties spoken in Okiro are from the same parent word. The cognation values diminish in Okweriseng (82%) and Ofambe (80%), and the average inter-gender cognition across the three communities is still high at 84.0%. Going by the gold standard of lexicostatistics, language varieties with cognation of 80% and above are considered dialects of the same language (Swadesh, 1952; Lee and Williamson, 1990; Hock, 2021; Prevot et al., 2006). It therefore follows from Table 9 that the male and female varieties of Ubang do not qualify as separate languages. They are instead, distinct gender dialects of the same language.

Having established by cognation percentages that the dual-sex speech varieties spoken in each Ubang community are not separate languages but distinct dialects, intra-gender cognation was checked across the three communities.

Firstly, the female basic vocabulary was compared in each of the communities with that of the other two communities. As Table 10 illustrates, the female variety of Okweriseng matches those of Ofambe and Okiro at 78 and 77%, respectively. This is slightly below the 80% language mark. Thus, it suggests that the female variety spoken in Okweriseng is different from those of Ofambe and Okiro; the cognation value for latter two communities is 89%. By implication, there is a cluster of two female languages among the Ubang; one is spoken in

Okweriseng and the other in Ofambe and Okiro. Suffice it to say, however, that the interest of this paper is the status of female versus male varieties, which we have identified as gender dialects.

The intra-male cognation (Table 11) again indicates the highest homogeneity between Okiro and Ofambe (90%); Okweriseng tallies in 89% and 85% with Ofambe and Okiro, respectively. However, all three male varieties pass off as dialects of a single language, since there cognation percentages are above 80%.

As Tables 9 to 11 shows, all three categories – inter-gender, intra-female and intra-male - average in the eighty percentile, though the male variety is slightly more homogenous across the three Ubang communities. Nonetheless, going by the lexicostatistic benchmark of 80% cut-off, female and male varieties of Ubang are not distinct languages, but qualify as gender dialects of the same language, as adjudged by their predominantly high vocabulary alignment (>80%).

Thus, on the grounds of cognation, the female and male varieties of Ubang are gender dialects of the same language. Thus, the second objective of the study has been achieved. It should be noted, however, that gender differences like tonal and vowel alternations yet occur among cognate words. Thus, cognation percentages while attesting to mutual intelligibility do not completely reflect the level of gender differentiation.

Is Ubang gender-differentiation diglossic?

The presumptive claim in this paper is that an exotic gender diglossic situation prevails in Ubang communities.

To paraphrase the definitions of several scholars (Marçais, 1930; Ferguson, 1959; Trudgill, 2000; Crystal, 2008), diglossia is a situation whereby two distinct varieties of [the same] language are used under different domains throughout a community, with speakers considering one to be more prestigious than the other. To satisfy the first part of this working definition, the author established in the preceding section that the male and female varieties of Ubang are gender dialects. It remains to show that the varieties are used in different domains and that one is considered more prestigious than the other.

The domains of male and female Ubang varieties

Crystal (2008: 148) describes domain simply as “A group of institutionalized social situations, typically constrained by a common set of behavioural rules”. By this definition, linguistic domains have different cognitive settings insofar as they are understood and spontaneously identified by members of the speech community. These settings could be physical, social, psychological even temperamental. Domains could also be understood as social context. For instance, it is common among educated Nigerians to converse officially in Nigerian English, while switching to Nigerian Pidgin when chattering among friends (official versus unofficial domains). Often too, individuals could use Nigerian Pidgin to crack jokes in light moments and revert to Nigerian English for official matters (jocular versus official domains). Indeed, there could be several strata of domains and select varieties of languages for them; meaning that there is a plethora of domains that require distinct varieties. Domains could be physical, social, intimate, intellectual even abstract (Hirschfeld and Gelman, 1994). However, whatever the nature of the domain, it must be licensed, recognised and encoded in the psyche of a community of competent speakers. Such social understanding of domain and appropriate speech type is part of what van Dijk (2018:258) refers to as the ‘worldview’ that constitute the ‘social cognition’ of the speech community. Social cognition is a social understanding, a worldview, which even if not overtly expressed, informs the behaviour of members of a community. This may extend to any realm of human existence, including gender.

Among the Ubang, gender does constitute a psycholinguistic domain, to the extent that each gender has a distinct speech variety; a formal one, not just restricted to style. However, contrary to wide reports that female speech (style) is disfavoured in public space (Trudgill, 1974; Cheshire, 1978; Coates, 1995; Wodak, 1997; Litosseliti, 2013), the Ubang female variety is used, alongside the male variety, across all spheres of the society. Indeed, from the point of view of gender being a social construct, the Ubang have a collective consciousness, an understanding, a socio-cognitive

knowledge of the gender domain in speech. Ubang natives participate in that domain as exclusive, but reciprocal speaker or hearer. In fact, for the Ubang, gender is that dominant super-domain which pervades all other linguistic domains. The second condition for diglossia is thus satisfied by the fact that each speaker uses the variety of the language that suits his or her gender domain.

Mutually exclusive as the gender domain may seem, it is just as well inclusive; for whereas males and females speak their variety in exclusion, both genders participate inclusively in comprehending both varieties. Thus, the domain derives from the speaker’s gender, and females and males use them exclusively as speakers but inclusively as hearers. This is an entirely new vista to the proposal of gender as a social construct. Within the Ubang gender domain, a specific variety is consistently spoken by females and another by males with mutually intelligible comprehension.

Which gender variety of Ubang is more prestigious?

As for which variety is more prestigious, it has already been established that the female and male varieties are evenly pegged in terms of their scope of usage within the gender super-domain. Nonetheless, there are still subtle settings of high and low forms of the language. For instance, asked about a nature of each of the varieties, a male response was that the female “... language is soft and simple, not strong and complex like the male language”, while a female was of the opinion that the male variety “...is harsh and rude”. Another female opined, “The female language is better than that of the men. “Nobody calls his child ugly” she says, “so I cannot say mine is lower than theirs. If the men think theirs is better, it is better for them”. There are other kinds of diminutive allusions to the opposite gender variety, which typify the general attitude of one gender demoting the variety of the other.

Due to the high regard which each gender has for its own variety, members of each gender are mocked by their group if they use the opposite variety, except in making jest of the other gender. Thus, a situation of reciprocal demotion exists, whereby the females consider the male variety low and vice versa. This explains why both varieties feature in all kinds of interaction since, on the basis of mutual demotion; each gender considers its variety more prestigious than the other. Hence the third diglossic condition is satisfied, because in the gender domain, each gender considers its variety superior and the other inferior. Indeed, this disposition of mutual demotion is one of the guarantors of the diglossic status quo.

On the bases of the aforesaid, it was affirm that the dual-sex language phenomenon in Ubang is diglossia, since each gender-based variety has been shown via

lexicostatistics to be a distinct dialect, spoken in exclusive gender domains and accorded the status of prestige within its gender space.

Ethno-cultural agents of gender diglossia maintenance

This part of the study is largely derived from FGDs, IDIs and ethnographic notes. In it, the author demonstrate how, on the one hand, Ubang lore reinforce gender-languaging; while on the other hand, it is positively transferred and maintained through social agentive factors like parental linguistic role, polar-farming, table etiquette, customary censors and censures.

Lore that reinforce Ubang gender diglossia

Ubang lore encodes traditional myths and indigenous knowledge which strengthen the ideology and practice of dual-sexism and ensure its intergenerational transfer. Some of these include the mythical origin of dual-sex speech, the acknowledgement of footprint of God and the conviction that their gendered language is fool proof from external linguistic influence.

The mythical origin of dual-sex speech

Ubang lore has it that God gave them two languages, one each for males and females. According to oral tradition, it was a case of the patient getting the largest share. The Ubang were the last people in creation to be assigned a language by God. So, when their turn came, God discovered that there was a surplus language, which he magnanimously assigned to them as a reward for their patience. To avoid confusion, one of the languages was assigned to males and the other to females. It is held that due to the divine source of the dual-sex speech, the Ubang child simply acquires the speech form of its gender, regardless of its mother's linguistic background. In support of this belief, the oldest Ubang woman in Ofambe, at the time of the study, is quoted in Excerpt 1:

Since it is God that gave Ubang two *languages*, if you deliver a baby boy, that baby will come with *male language* from the mother's womb, and when it starts to speak it will speak male. If you deliver female, that female will come with its mother tongue from there, because it is God who gave them the language, so anybody born in Ubang must certainly come with the *language*, either male or female. (Excerpt 1)

An educated middle-aged man concurred, "If I marry in America and stay there, the child will be speaking Ubang language". There was even a stretched case of a man

whose family lives in faraway Port Harcourt and his wife is Igbo, yet he claims that his children speak pristine Ubang gender varieties. Indeed, the narrative of the mystical origin of Ubang dual-sex speech is strongly held by the young and old, the learned and the unlearned, even by women of other ethnic groups married to Ubang men. It is part of the socio-cognitive disposition that informs their positive attitude to dual-sex speech.

Acknowledgement of the footprint of God

Closely related to the mythical origin of Ubang dual-sex speech is the narrative of a covenantal footprint of God. It is held among the Ubang that because of God's predilection for them, he left his footprint on a concrete slate at the crest of the highest hill in Ubang land. The location of this footprint is sacred and hard to reach; only precious few have attained the feat of viewing it. It is held that when some scientists came on helicopter expedition to identify the spot, they met their Waterloo. As a result, hardly anyone was willing to embark on an uphill journey to identify the footprint. Nonetheless, the Ubang widely and strongly attest to the footprint as indelible evidence of the divine source of their linguistic heritage. This belief further crystalises the dual-sexism ideology.

Our dual-sex speech is fool proof from language contact

An extension of the claim to the natural intelligibility of the gender varieties is the belief in the puritan integrity of the gender varieties of speech. This is borne out of the social assumption (cognition) that no matter the influx of persons of other ethnicity into Ubang community, it would never affect the integrity and gender disaggregation of the language. When it was pointed out to native speakers that marriage and immigration could erode gender-languaging, responses were unanimously in line with the conviction in Excerpt II:

No, see; let me tell you, we have a culture here. No matter the rate of women coming from outside they can never dominate us. Like Okweriseng, before I got married officially, I befriended them. You put to bed with (the wife), your girlfriend o, but they don't allow you to marry. Nearly 90% of us pass through that. So how can they be more than us? (Excerpt II)

This position is charged with multiple implications. Firstly, it is anathema for the Ubang to marry from their community of origin. Despite this cultural restriction, they often have children outside wedlock with partners from the same community. In fact, participants explained that having children outside wedlock is so rampant that it is a means by which the dual-sex language phenomenon is

maintained by sheer population. This perception draws from the original notion that the language is infused at birth. This argument, in favour of language maintenance by population, seems at odds with the operational consequences of language contact. It is even more curious to note that more than half of those who made such assertions were born of immigrant mothers, whom they say learned the female variety to perfection after settling in Ubang communities.

Nonetheless, the myths and beliefs concerning the origin of Ubang dual-sex speech are etched in native socio-cognitive consciousness, to the extent that they reinforce gender diglossia and serve as the major stimuli for intentional gender differentiation, especially in terms of sound and tonal variation in cognate words.

Social agentive factors for Ubang diglossia maintenance

At first blush, the Ubang leave the enquirer with myths on the maintenance and propagation of gender diglossia. On further ethnographic probing though, they offer alternative narratives. This part of the study draws conclusions from interviews, non-participant observation and ethnographic notes about the ethno-cultural factors that guaranty the maintenance and intergenerational transfer of gender diglossia. The key agentive factors for this are parental linguistic role; polar-farming; table etiquette; customary censors and censures.

Parental linguistic roles

We had set out thinking that women played a dominant role in transferring both male and female varieties to children. As it turned out women are primarily engaged in the transfer of the female variety, and men, the male variety. Said a male youth:

I acquired it from especially my dad. If I am not mistaking in Ubang history, my dad is the oldest person as far as the community is concerned. My dad taught me all the language as far as that of male variety is concerned... from the way he speaks, I follow him to the farm, I listen, we always chat... The girls are always with their mum also to the farm. (Excerpt III)

Interestingly, most of the females interviewed stuck to the divine narrative. Therefore, the assertion of males about the role of their fathers nearly made us abandon the presupposition that the women play a more prominent role in gender disaggregation. But of course, they do. Firstly, while men only ensure that boys speak the male variety, women teach both males and females the female variety at the tender age. By so doing, women inadvertently ensure that grown up males comprehend

the female variety. In addition, women continue to assist the girls in the comprehension of the male variety. In fact, this role was also played for the boys while they were still toddlers. A teenage girl narrates:

I learned the language of woman from my mother as I was growing. When my father says something I don't get, I ask my mother who explains. That is how I got it small by small. (Excerpt IV)

Obviously, females are less conscious of their mothers' role in teaching them the female version precisely because they acquire it in the company of boys, even before the age of reason. Hence, it is indeed a natural process for them.

The variety that both females and males learn later is the male one. Thus, the female variety is acquired passively while the male is learned actively.

Evidently, the actors in keeping the status quo of Ubang gender diglossia are male and female adult members of the community. However, females play a more prominent role as agents of the female variety to both boys and girls, and tutors of the male variety to older girls for better comprehension. Adult males have the solitary role of teaching the boys the male version.

Polar-farming as agent of diglossia

The Ubang are predominantly agrarian. They have a hunting prehistory, which was tied to having lived on the mountains with sparse land for cultivation. They lived uphill as a defence measure. It provided surveillance advantage and they could haul boulders down to deter prospective attackers – one native discretely referred to this as “tribal crises of history”. However, encouraged by colonial masters and Christian missionaries, who assured them of peace in the plains, they descended the mountain and put the generous expanse of land to good use.

Originally, people were living in the mountains; they were running away from tribal crises of history. You understand, as soon as Christianity began to trace way in, they discovered that coming down to the level land will make them exposed, will make them accessible, go to school, do the rest of other things... today you see traditional signs and things that can make you know that people had dwelled in such mountains... In the ancient time there were certain things that were making people to stay on the mountain. It was not as if they over-liked the place; but they discovered that being on the mountain keeps you away from certain dangers like taxation, exposing yourself to all this white culture and the rest of other things. (Excerpt V)

In typical agrarian societies, farming involves the whole

family at different levels of production. The norm is that the entire (nuclear) family cultivated the same area. While men clear farms, till the soil, plant, harvest and control farm income; women and children would weed the farm, plant supporting vegetables, process and sell farm produce. Markedly different scenario was found in Ubang communities. Here, men and women managed different farms, produced different crops, and enjoy independent financial control with specified financial responsibilities.

You see that we divide the land into two, everything mountain, we use for cocoa. As you enter Ubang, the left-hand side of the mountain is 90% planted with cocoa and the right-hand side, this side, 90% is for yam farming. So, the women do more of yam farming, cassava, groundnut, planting of vegetables or garden fruit. (Excerpt VI)

Thus, the Ubang practise a strict polar-farming system, whereby the females predominantly cultivate food crops like yam, cassava, groundnut and vegetables; while the men produce cocoa, a cash crop. As the Excerpt VI stipulates, men and women work on separate farms – the men, on the land footing the hills as well as on plateaus, the women, across from the main road on plain land. Whereas all the land purportedly belongs to men, there is a social norm of polarisation which confines male cocoa farms to one side and female food crops to the opposite side of the community. Usually, men allot farmlands to their wives, but female plots do not adjoin those of their husbands. In other words, women are not allotted part of the same stretch of land as their spouses; they have their own farming area. The farming arrangement for women is such that men clear the land, till it and sometimes plant yam, while the women water, tend, weed and harvest the yam. Cassava, groundnut and other garden plants are cropped exclusively by women.

Since male and female farms are physically apart, it follows that when members of the household leave for work, females and males literally go in different directions. Not only that, while at work, they largely interact and converse only with the same gender. In those farms, they work, eat and rest in mutual gender exclusion for between 8 and 10 h daily.

There is no underestimating the implication of such a gender-based polar occupational arrangement for linguistic diversity. Females and males spend all of work time with the same gender nearly all year round. Wives, mothers, daughters and other women “excommunicated” from fathers, sons and other men. Unconsciously, polar-farming is the school of gender diglossia, the main incubator of dual-sex speech. The farm is indeed the epicentre of gender disaggregation, as well as the cocoon of its maintenance. If the Ubang are so conceited about the stability of their gender diglossia, it is based on the firm knowledge that the farm constitutes the physically demarcated seedbeds on which the present ubiquitous gender varieties are fortified.

Table etiquette as agent of diglossia

There are interesting social criteria which apply to feeding in Ubang land. The first is that men ordinarily do not give their wives money for food and domestics. This too has a gender laced mutual socio-cognitive understanding based on the dual-sexism ideology.

All the proceeds from female farms are kept by the woman. She uses them for domestic subsistence – food, clothing, and housekeeping. Any excess fund it kept by her, though some give periodic accounts of their expenditure. The men also keep all the cash proceeds from cocoa sales. Men are responsible for recurrent and capital expenditure – school fees, community levies, tax, housing and estate. Due to the traditional gender-based financial freedom, Ubang men do not make overt financial contributions towards housekeeping. They simply come home to eat, operating under the notion that they contribute to subsistence by allotting lands to the women and offering initial labour on the farms. The gender-based sense of shared financial responsibility constitutes part of Ubang socio-cognitive values.

More interesting than provision for food is the etiquette of eating. “*So how will I eat with my wife?*” that is how one respondent summarised Ubang table manners. There is an Ubang double counsel who stipulates that “men may not eat alone yet men should not eat with their wives”. It is a given social practice which is imbibed more by imitation than by edict. Excerpt VII is a male account followed by that of a female (Excerpt VIII).

Imagine, when my wife came newly, she was unable to adapt to my culture because I told her that me I don’t eat alone. If they give me food now, these neighbours that we live together, we call ourselves. So how will I eat with my wife? We hardly eat together. If the other people cook food, the other house there, if they cook food, they would send for me. I would go there and I would eat. (Excerpt VII)

When I cook, there is some other place that my husband stayed. I would bring food and keep there. All the men in that compound, they will come and join my husband and eat the food. So, it isn’t permitted for a woman to join hand with the husband and eat...The women, when they finish cooking, they would bring the food to the oldest woman in that compound. Everybody will bring her food and keep. All of them they will come and gather, and eat the food together, and men, they would be eating their own. Children, they will be eating their own. (Excerpt VIII)

It may be true that many cultures in Africa do not espouse the western dining convention whereby father, mother and children sit around a table for dinner. In many rural Nigerian settings such as Yoruba and Igbo, men would eat alone, while their wives waited on them. The

Ubang arrangement of male guests at nearly every meal further strengthens gender disaggregation, as the self-same men and women who have exclusively spent the entire morning and evening together on the farm continue the camaraderie at home. Naturally, such meals dovetail into convivial drinking and chattering till late night. This social habit leaves very little time for intense adult male-female interaction even at home, as the relationship between spouses is largely nocturnal, "When they go to bed, they now discuss... when necessary, we both create a time to discuss family issues". So it is that, for the Ubang, dining habits extend workplace conversations and consequently bar sustained cross-gender interactions. Thus, in addition to the practice of polar-farming, there is polar-socialising by way of wining and dining.

Diglossic censors and censures

Aware of the uniqueness of their dual-sex speech, the Ubang deploy subtle but coercing means to maintain the status quo. This is achieved by mounting peer pressure and social licensing.

As is the case in other communities, beyond infancy, children spontaneously congregate in gender groups to play and indulge in adventure. Considering the Ubang situation, this comes with an attendant linguistic discrimination. Once girls and boys are old enough to follow their same-sex parent to the farm, they also begin to align to gendered sociolinguistic affiliations. During child play, no sooner than a new child comes along do group members begin to censor traits of the other gender in his or her speech. Language-shaming begins by poking fun at the gender-inappropriate speaker.

Subsequently, there is peer-taunting with sneers and jeers, as well as derisive jokes and scorning of the 'culprit' as belonging to the other gender. In most cases, such censors via language-shaming will force the child to fall in line with the language its gender peers. If that fails, extreme censures are applied. For instance, a nonconforming child could be ostracised from the peer group. Peer censure is relaxed when the child has adapted enough to detect the aberration of another child. Having undergone peer censures, the young adult yet must be licensed by the adult community as a competent speaker. This again is not formalised. It only happens that anyone not thought to be competent in a gender variety is not allowed to speak in community gatherings. If the person self-selects to speak, s/he would be shouted down. Social censures could be extended to other spheres as this speaker explains:

Haba, you will not be reckoned with in the society, that you are not a serious man. If you invite them to your compound, they will not come. In fact, the way they will look at you, you will learn overnight to meet up. Things

could degenerate further. Supposing, in the very rare case, an adolescent yet persists with gender-language transgressions, s/he would be so derided as a social misfit. We are told that adults who are maladjusted to dual-sex speech are willy-nilly forced out of the Ubang community. (Excerpt IX)

Conclusion

The language of the Ubang is laced with profound gender distinctions, which penetrate every aspect of ordinary life, to the extent that a clear gender domain is socially acknowledged for speakers and hearers in the same speech act. By lexicostatistics, we identified the two varieties as gender dialects of the same language. Whereas females and males exclusively speak their respective gender dialects, there is mutual intelligibility between the genders. The recognition of the speaker's gender as a structural (non-stylistic) linguistic domain is a novel part of Ubang social memory. Thus, an abstract gender domain was defined whereby the diglossic dual-sex speech operates. Also instructive is the psychic mutual demotion of the opposite gender variety. It is this feature of reciprocal high and low varieties that confers fool proof diglossic status on Ubang speech communities.

Ubang social memory is imbued with a strong ideology of dual-sexism, which is largely sponsored by mythical narratives like the divine origin of gender diglossia, the belief that it is infused in a child at birth and the acknowledgement of God's footprint on the hilltop, as prove of their predilection. However gender disaggregation came about among the Ubang, it is jealously guarded as a defining cultural heritage. Though spousal immigration poses a threat, the socio-cognitive ideologies, attitudes, norms and values, which permeate Ubang lifestyle, have helped to preserve the practise of gender diglossia.

While Ubang lore and myths fuel the ideology of dual-sexism, it is crystallised by parent-child conversation and an ingrained attitude of gender polarisation which interfaces dual-sex speech in farming, social life and child play. Mothers play the capital role of passing the female speech form to male and female toddlers, as well as teach the male variety to young girls. Fathers transfer the male variety to young boys once they begin to accompany them to the farm. The practise of polar-farming, whereby males and females farm separately, has proved to be the school of Ubang gender diglossia. There are also polar-social norms of table etiquette and child play, and values like the social construct of gender financial responsibility firmly etched in Ubang socio-cognition. These, alongside peer censures like language-shaming and adult social licensing have held up against the disintegration of Ubang gender diglossia and reinforced its maintenance and intergenerational transfer.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflicts of interests.

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