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**Swearing by Women in a Miraa Market: Convergence, Identity, and “Survival” Strategies**

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| **\*Corresponding author**  *Mukuni D. Muturi*  **Article History**  *Received: 23.08.2017*  *Accepted: 28.09.2017*  *Published: 30.09.2017*  **DOI:**  10.36347/sjahss.2017.v05i09.027  **C:\Users\Habibur Rahman\Downloads\SJAHSS.png** | **Abstract:** This study aimed at establishing the patterns as well as social and psychological motives for swearing by women in a miraa market setting. The study was carried out in Kῖrῖtirῖ open-air miraa market in Mbeere South sub-county within Embu County. Eight negotiations involving both females-only and mixed-sex traders were recorded and subsequently analysed. The analysis indicates that women swear in the miraa market to achieve the goals of socialization, to achieve identity and differentiation, and to converge with the miraa traders’ culture of swearing. It is a means with which women are able to counter male dominance and persist in a setting that is full of competitiveness and aggression. Significantly, women use swearing as a “survival strategy” to score highly valuabe socioeconomic goals in a male-dominated environment.  **Keywords:** Swearing, women, market setting, social identity, linguistic identity, pragmatics. |
| **INTRODUCTION**  Languages are spoken using a particular register in a particular context [1]. In almost all languages, swearing is a linguistic device within social interactions of males and females. It is used in formal and informal settings to serve both personal and |

interpersonal functions [2]. This has been confirmed by comprehensive studies which have shown that the frequency of swearwords in a speaker’s daily output ranges between 0.3% to 0.7% [3-5]. Swearing is defined as the use of a sub-set of a language’s lexicon to express strong emotion within a communication context [2]. Relatedly, swearwords are considered as multifunctional pragmatic units which assume, in addition to expression of emotion, various discourse functions including: coordinating discourse among interlocutors, organizing the interaction, and structuring of verbal exchange [6-8].

Traditionally, women are viewed as guardians of both language and propriety [9] and as experts of euphemisms, who use weaker swearwords [10]. At the same time, swearing has largely been deemed a males’ behaviour [11]. Contrariwise, recent studies have shown an increased knowledge and usage of swearwords by women in various contexts [3, 12, 13]. There is evidence indicating that there are little or no gender differences in the use and lexical familiarity of swearwords [2, 14-16,]

A typical miraa market is usually male-dominated. Nevertheless, the number of women in miraa trading has increased tremendously especially because miraa is grown as a key source of income in many households [2, 13]. Related research has documented the prevalence of swearing in the language of miraa traders during negotiations with intention to score both social as well as transactional goals in the market environment [2, 17]. It is our conviction that miraa markets present a naturally occurring setting that is ideal in capturing not only the particular swearwords used during negotiations but also in examining the functions that swearing serves in the speech of women. Little research attention has been focused on the patterns and motivations behind swearing in the language of women in a miraa market. Using a corpus-based approach, we designed a study on why women swear in a miraa market. The sections that follow present the theoretical approaches to swearing, categories of swear words and perceptions of women who swear. Afterwards, we describe the methodology and present the results of our study.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Approaches to Why Women Swear**

This section explores some of the approaches that have been proposed to explain the linguistic phenomenon of swearing in human communication. We relied on these approaches to explain the motivations behind the use of swearwords in the language of female miraa traders in both females-only and mixed-sex negotiations.

A Neuro-Psycho-Social Theory of why swearing is central to our every day communicative practices has been put forward [18] which draws on neurological, psychological, and sociocultural motivations. According to the theory, swearing can be automatic, or reflexive, or it can be premeditated and employed for specific purposes. Our specific cultures and languages may shape the range of taboo subjects and expressions employed in swearing but the functions remain the same. Swearing by women can therefore be explained from different perspectives.

From the psychological perspective, swearing by women may be used to rebel against typical gender roles [19]. Breaking the rules of language use may have certain connotations of strength or freedom which they (women) find desirable [20]. Swearing may also be used by women in such a setting to conform or converge with the culture of a particular group and therefore identify with such a group. Aligned with the psychological concept of swearing, it is likely that swearing by female traders is a socially learned, consciously employed linguistic device for converging and identifying with miraa traders culture of swearing [2, 13, 16].

The sociocultural tenet describes content or appropriateness of a chosen word and considers factors such as speaker power. It explains that swearing may be used by women to counter male dominance especially in the presence of men while in the company of fellow women, it may be employed as a bonding factor to maintain and strengthen in-group solidarity as well as mark out-group boundaries [21]. From this perpective, it may be that swearing by women in the miraa market functions as a tool in which they aspire to match or counter male aggression and competitiveness as well as establish and maintain a social bond among them. These seem very crucial for them to be able to trade successfully in the market setting.

Swearing by women may also be explained by an approach based on pragmatics [22]. Some of the pragmatic variables that influence swearing include speaker-listener relationship, the social-physical setting, and one’s jurisdiction over a location. The motives for swearing listed under this approach include assertion of identity in a group, an intention to shock or insult, and marking of social distance or solidarity [23]. Agreeing with this approach, we argue that swearing by women in the miraa market is a consciously employed linguistic device intended for group marking and differentiation. Swearing serves these functions in consideration of certain contextual variables such as gender and setting which seem very crucial for women’s trading.

In developing an analytical framework for this study, we assumed that the approaches above are complementary and have clear connections between them. Our focus, however, was on the inter-individual functions of swearing in the language of female traders in the miraa market.

**Categories of Swearwords**

To show prominence of the strong relationship between swearing and the concept of taboo, research has shown evidence how most swearwords across cultures are drawn to a large extent from the various taboo categories in the society [2, 5, 8]. Among the categories previous research [5] has developed for classifying swearwords include: sexual references (e.g. fuck); religious blasphemy (e.g. Jesus Christ); scatological referents (e.g. shit, crap); animal names (e.g. bitch); ethnic-racial insults (e.g. nigger); referents to perceived psychological, physical or social deviations (e.g. retard); and ancestral allusions (e.g. son of a bitch, bastard). Another study [8] has developed five major categories from which most swearwords are drawn including religion, scatological, sex organ, sexual activities, and the mother’s theme. A recent study of swearing in Kimbeere [13] identified six categories into which it classified common Kimbeere swearwords namely: sex and body parts (e.g. *kagura* (clitoris); animal names (e.g. *ngitῖ* (dog/bitch); religion (e.g. *Ngai-Mwathani* (God-Almighty); sexual activity (e.g. *thicwa* (get fucked); bodily discharge (e.g. *matoko* (genital discharge); and those drawn from social and cultural orientations for instance parenthood (*nyũkwe*) and circumcision (*kῖvῖcῖ*).

Nonetheless, studies have shown that across cultures the sex domain is the most common taboo category from which swearwords are sourced [2, 24, 25]. It therefore follows that a discussion of swearing invariably involves the concept of taboo. Taking cognizance of the above argument, this study has adopted both the terms *swearwords* and *taboo words* and used them synonymously and interchangeably to refer to swearing with intention to allow semantic consistency.

**Perceptions of Women who Use Swearwords**

Sociolinguistics has clearly shown that children’s or adults’ use of language can characterize certain qualities about the user, for example, intelligence, or abstractness of thought [26]. It is reasonable to assume that speakers who use swearing would prompt similar judgements among listeners as well. Research on perception of swearing that has been informed by the core concepts of Expectancy Violations Theory [27] has demonstrated how constant swearing by a speaker leads to violations of expectations on the part of the listener. This arousal leads to social evaluations of the swearer by the hearer [28]. Expectations, in this case, are enduring patterns of anticipated behaviour which are based upon social norms and specific characteristics of the communicator, for instance, sex [27].

Indeed, society’s view of women’s use of “bad” linguistic forms is negative as they (women) are encouraged to be discreet, quiet, and polite in their behaviour [29]. Both swearing by women and women who use swearwords, owing to cultural attitudes and social expectations, are therefore subject to a set of negative evaluations. Incidentally, such cultural scripts have labelled swearing by men as more appropriate. Perhaps paradoxically, there is a general concensus about swearing as offensive behaviour because of its strong connection with taboo and which when committed, is deemed a violation of some social norm [7] regardless of gender considerations.

It is worth noting that negative perceptions of women’s use of swearwords continues to persist despite some studies providing evidence that there are few to almost none gender differences in knowledge and usage of swearwords [2, 7]. Indeed, it is well established that many women use swearwords aplenty and that the usage can be correlated with socioeconomic characteristics and situational factors [3, 19, 30]. In line with the theories of perception, swearing by female traders may be done with the desire to counter negative social evaluations by projecting a rebellious attitude. It may also be linked to our earlier explanations of converging and therefore identifying with miraa traders’ culture of aggression as well as defiance. This is perhaps done with intention to score highly valued goals of trading successfully in a miraa market.

**MATERIAL AND METHODS**

**Research Design**

This study was a descriptive survey of language use by women in a miraa market environment. The study data were qualitative in nature since interest was in capturing the actual swearwords used by female traders in a miraa market.

**Participants and Procedure**

Participants were drawn from Kῖrῖtirῖ miraa market. It is an open-air market located along Embu-Kivaa road in Mbeere South Sub-county, within Embu County. A total of 18 female and male traders were sampled using the social networks approach. Since the focus of our study was women’s use of language, the number of participants was skewed in favour of women (females=13; males=5). Participants were recorded during their naturally occurring negotiations. The criteria for selection were being a miraa trader as well as a native speaker of Kimbeere language. Kimbeere is a languge [31] spoken by Ambeere people found within Embu County in the Eastern region of Kenya in East Africa. The region is known for the cultivation of *Catha edulis*(khat) as an economic activity. The inhabitants also chew the leaves of the plant as a social custom.

Recording was done while the participants were engaged in buying and selling of miraa after being informed that their speech was being recorded. During recording, a distinction was made between females-only and mixed-sex negotiations in order to account for the usage of swearwords by women in different contexts. A total of 8 recordings involving 2 to 3 participants were obtained and in which 4 recordings involved only female participants, while the other 4 had mixed-sex participants. An analysis of females-only and mixed-sex negotiations was deemed a convenient way to have a clearer perception of how women employ swearing as a linguistic device and how it serves to construct interactions between female and male traders in the market. Table 1 displays the number of recordings, their length, and the distribution of the sample in terms of gender.

**Table-1: Distribution of recordings**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Recording | Length | | Participants | |
| Minutes | Seconds | Males | Females |
| 1 | 10 | 25 | 0 | 2 |
| 2 | 10 | 26 | 0 | 2 |
| 3 | 10 | 11 | 0 | 2 |
| 4 | 10 | 16 | 0 | 2 |
| 5 | 10 | 05 | 2 | 1 |
| 6 | 10 | 29 | 1 | 1 |
| 7 | 15 | 21 | 1 | 1 |
| 8 | 10 | 15 | 1 | 2 |
| Sub-Total | 85 | 148 | 5 | 13 |
| Total | 1 hr, 27 min, 28 sec. | | 18 | |

**ANALYSIS**

content of the recorded negotiations was analysed through a number of steps. First, the recorded negotiations were transcribed on paper. During transcription, the gender of the participants was noted. These transcriptions were carefully studied and the swearwords identified. Secondly, summative analysis was employed where these words were tallied and grouped with regard to their frequency and patterns of usage in terms of the gender of the participants in the negotiations. Finally, a detailed theoretical discussion that was premised on the propositions of the Psycho-Social tenets of the NPS theory of speech, as well as the assumptions of both pragmatics and Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT) was done. These helped to determine the motives for swearword usage by women in the market.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The swearwords used by women in both females-only and mixed-sex negotiations and their lexical frequencies were as presented in table 2.

**Table-2: Kimbeere language swearwords in the language of female and male traders and their lexical frequencies**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Swearwords | | Lexical Frequency | | |
|  |  | Females-only negotiations | Mixed-sex negotiations | |
| Kimbeere | English gloss |  | Males | Females |
| Ntheke | Testes | 0 | 8 | 0 |
| Kagura | Clitoris | 22 | 15 | 17 |
| Mũthuti | Arse | 6 | 2 | 2 |
| Mbῖnῖ | Vagina | 0 | 7 | 2 |
| Mũthinũ | Penis | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| Kῖvῖcῖ | Uncircumcised male | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| Kῖrῖgũ | Uncircumcised female | 14 | 12 | 2 |
| Nyũkwe | Your mother | 7 | 6 | 4 |
| Thicwa | Fuck you | 0 | 18 | 2 |
| Ngai-Mwathani | God-Almighty | 2 | 12 | 1 |
| Ngitῖ | Dog/Bitch | 12 | 1 | 6 |
| Matoko | Genital discharge | 0 | 8 | 7 |

For ease of analysis and presentation, the swearwords in Table 2 were grouped into various categories with regard to where they are sourced: sexuality, religion, bodily discharge, animal names, and social/cultural orientations [13]. Studies have shown that majority of swearwords across cultures contain sexual orientations but taboo subjects can vary widely and quite often extend to other aspects of social life [25]. Table 3 dispalys the categories into which we grouped the various swearwords.

**Table-3: Categories of swearwords**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Categories of swearwords | Lexical count |
| Sex organs and body parts | 5 |
| Sexual activity | 1 |
| Animal names | 1 |
| Religion | 1 |
| Bodily discharge | 1 |
| Social/cultural | 3 |
| Total | 12 |

Table 3 shows that swearwords in the language of women in both females-only and mixed-sex negotiations are sourced from sexuality, religion, and animal names. This was seen to counter assumptions that women are masters of euphemisms, who employ weaker swearwords [10]. Actually, it was consistent with findings that many women use swearwords aplenty and that the usage can be correlated with socioeconomic characteristics and situational factors [3, 19, 30]. Apart from the typical categories of sexuality, religion, and animal names, swearwords in the language of female traders drew from domains related to social aspects like parenthood, and cultural aspects to do with circumcision. This was consistent with previous studies on swearing in Kimbeere [2]. However, the sex domain remained the most common source of swearwords in the language of not only women but also men. This is aligned with previous research [2, 17]. Table 4 displays the lexical frequencies of swearwords in all categories used by female traders in same-sex and mixed sex negotiations.

**Table-4: Lexical frequencies of swearword categories used by female traders in females-only and mixed-sex negotiations**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Swearwords categories | Females-only negotiations | Mixed-sex negotiations | | |
|  |  | Female | Male | Total |
| Sex organs and body parts | 29 | 23 | 34 | 57 |
| Sexual activity | 0 | 2 | 18 | 20 |
| Animal names | 12 | 6 | 1 | 7 |
| Religion | 2 | 1 | 12 | 13 |
| Bodily discharge | 0 | 7 | 8 | 15 |
| Social/cultural orientation | 21 | 11 | 18 | 29 |
| Total | 64 | 50 | 91 | 141 |
| Note: N=205 | | | | |

Results in Table 4 indicate that there was a high propensity for female traders to swear in the market. The Psycho-Social tenet of the NPS theory argues that swearing may be a socially learned behaviour that is strategically employed to achieve certain goals of group identity. The pragmatics perspective also explains that swearing may be employed as a convergence strategy. This suggests that female traders employ swearing as a linguistic device with which they intended to conform to the culture of swearing that is characteristic of miraa trade [2, 17] and therefore maintain their identity as members of this group. From another perspective, female traders did not seem inhibited by both cultural attitudes and social expectations in their usage of language. Rather, they were perhaps countering negative perceptions of women’s use of swearwords that are dictated by culturally defined scripts. Breaking the rules of language use may have had connotations of strength and freedom which female traders found desirable [20]. In doing so, they projected themselves as rebellious, aggressive and competitive. For them, these qualities seemed of high value for socioeconomic reasons and were a means with which they thrived in the market environment.

Results show that women used more swearwords in females-only negotiations than in mixed-sex negotiations. From the pragmatics point of view, this reflected an established in-group behaviour in which female traders were reluctant to engage with out-group participants. In this sense, swearing created a bond among them that made them feel strongly linked in a way that made them not only socialize amicably but also transact compellingly. Findings show that females refrained from using swearwords relating to sexual activity and bodily discharge in the presence of other females. The sociocultural aspect of the NPS theory argues that swearing is a function of appropriateness of a chosen word. Therefore, swearing by female traders may have been dictated by contextual (in) appropriateness with which they perceived swearwords drawn from the two domains. The high frequencies with which female traders used swearwords from sex organs and body parts (28), animal names (11) and social/cultural orientations (20) can be also explained as a function of (in)offensive judgements and contextual (in)appropriateness. Female traders’ offensiveness threshold seemed low in the presence of other females. There was low frequency of female traders’ usage of swearwords from religion. If the sociocultural aspect of the NPS theory argues that a person’s use of swearwords is determined by their cultural environment which includes their religiosity, it is likely that females used such few swearwords from religion because they are rather religious [32].

There was a major shift in the patterns as well as frequency of usage of swearwords by female traders in mixed-sex negotiations. Our findings show that females swore less in the presence of males which agrees with previous studies on gender differences in swearing behaviour [33, 34]. Aligned with the sociocultural explanations of (in) offensive judgements and contextual (in) appropriateness, it seemed that the presence of the opposite sex had an inhibitive effect in female taders’ swearing behaviour. The reduction of swearwords’ usage from almost all categories in the language of female traders may have been influenced by typical cultural attitudes and social expectations with which they expected males to view their language. Since sociocultural scripts dictate that it is not appropriate for women to swear, female traders felt the need to conform to such expectations. Additionally, Expectancy Violations theory may be used to explain this phenomenon. Among the Ambeere people, taboo language in the speech of women is socially associated (especially by men) with negative social behaviour like prostitution [13]. Use of fewer swearwords by female traders in the presence of males may have been motivated by their desire to avoid such perceptions. The use of swearwords related to sexual activity by female traders only in the presence of males indicates that females conceptualize sexual intercourse as an activity involving opposite sex and may have been dictated by their religiosity as well as cultural and social roles of the Mbeere community.

The patterns and frequencies with which female traders used swearwords from certain categories in mixed-sex negotiations showed that the pragmatics of swearword usage as well as the sociocultural aspect of contex (in) appropriateness and (in) offensive judgements was very strong in the influence female traders’ language use. Differences in the frequency of usage by female traders were found in the categories of sex organs and body parts (*23 by females, 34 by males*) and social/cultural orientations (*11 by females, 18 by males*). Indeed, there were notably big differences in other domains including: sexual activity (*2 by females, 18 by males*); and religion (*1 by females, 12 by males*). In this sense, offensiveness and inappropriatness threshold for female traders seemed to fluctuate between high and low. The very low usage of swearwords from religion by female traders has been explained as a function of their religiosity.

Findings indicate, however, that it was not always that female traders reduced their swearing in the presence of males. Table 4 shows that female traders used more swearwords in the animal names category (*6*) than males (*1*) and used almost the same number of swearwords in the bodily discharge category (*7 by females against 8 by males*). This implied that it was not always that females’ swearing behaviour was inhibited by males’ presence. Sociolinguistics has explained how males increase swearing in the presence of females to perpetuate male dominance [2]. We suggest that female traders adopted the use of swearwords in almost the same frequency as males or a frequency higher perhaps to assert themselves and match or counter male traders’ dominance during negotiations.

The significance of our findings is that they confirm that swearing is a common linguistic phenomenon in the language of women in a miraa market setting. Since a typical miraa market is a male dominated setting, female traders may need to adopt some strategy for them to persist in such an environment. From both the NPS theory and the pragmatics perspective, swearing by women in this context may be viewed as a learned and maintained behaviour aimed at varied goals: it is a way in which women intend to rebel against social norms and differentiate themselves from other (female) groups. It may also be aimed at identifying with miraa traders’ culture of swearing and therefore converging with the group’s characteristics of aggression, and high competitiveness. From a sociocultural perspective, swearing becomes a way in which women liberate themselves from typical cultural attitudes and social expectations thereby achieving freedom to engage in a vital activity. On the other hand, aligned with the assumptions of Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT), women employ swearing in a way that they would not be negatively evaluated. Ultimately, swearing by women becomes a “survival strategy” with which they intend to score valuable socioeconomic goals.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper aimed at establishing the patterns and motives that swearing serves in the language of female traders in a miraa market. The analysis shows that swearing is employed by women as a means to achieve varied goals. Our study acknowledges swearing by women to be a learned and strategically employed social practice that serves intricate pragmatic, sociocultural, as well as psychological functions. Swearing is a way in which these women have come to differentiate themselves from other groups and establish both their social and linguistic identity. It is a means with which women have been able to perform highly precious transactional activities of buying and selling miraa successfully in the market. Importantly, these women have carved a strategy for achieving highly valued socioeconomic goals in the market through swearing.

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