



Gender and power as negotiated in Bukusu circumcision ceremonies

Scholastica Nabututu Wabende & Simon Nganga Wanjala

Gender and power as negotiated in Bukusu circumcision ceremonies

Recent studies on language and gender that focus on songs and beer drinking sessions within the context of the Bukusu circumcision ceremony have shown that language is gendered and that it espouses male gender. Against this backdrop, in this study we aim to denaturalise this view by focussing on conversations within the circumcision ceremony. By using theoretical and methodological principles from critical discourse and conversation analysis in particular, we argue that, by using linguistic strategies, traditional gender roles are not only discursively highlighted but they are also negotiated and even resisted. This study falls within recent discussions in critical discourse analysis that have shown that language masks asymmetrical power relations on the one hand, and within postcolonial studies that have shown that gender discourses can reflect collisions between differing points of views on the other hand. The data used in this study is four audio recordings of conversations that took place alongside the main ceremony. This data has been analysed at the level of content and prosodic organisation to identify discursive practices that reveal the negotiation and contestation of gender roles. The study contributes to recent discussions in critical discourse analysis by exposing gender asymmetries and contestations that lie behind 'taken-for-granted' realities, with specific examples from the postcolonial context of the Bukusu circumcision ceremony. **Keywords:** Kenya, discourse, negotiation, power, circumcision, Bukusu, asymmetries.


Introduction

Recent research by Thorne and Baron reveals a renewed interest in gender studies. What renders this research particularly interesting is the gradual shift in perspective from the focus on "women's subordination within economic, political, and social institutions" (Thorne 10) to the study of gendered dynamics in interaction. Within this perspective, Coates (285) defines gender in terms of "selves" that individuals enact in interaction. Gender as a negotiated concept features prominently within this approach that has links to recent poststructuralist theories that "point to splits and fissures in categories previously seen as bounded or dichotomous and brings into focus hybrid [...] identities" (Pavlenko and Blackledge 13). Thus, these studies go beyond what scholars have described as "deliberate one-sidedness" and focus on how, through linguistic means, gender is legitimised, challenged, and negotiated "to open new [...] options for [the] oppressed and subjugated" gender (Thorne 10).

In this article, we focus on how real-life conversations are related to gender constructions and negotiation. Focusing on conversation that accompanies and dramatizes the circumcision ceremony among the Bukusu in Kenya, in this study we investigate which linguistic resources the participants use to challenge male domination within this male-dominated ceremony, how the appropriateness of such linguistic resources is negotiated, and how they contribute to the understanding of the relationship between male and female participants. In this way,


Scholastica Nabututu Wabende is a PhD student in the Department of Literature, Linguistics, Foreign Languages and Film Studies, School of Arts and Social Sciences at Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya.

Email: scomariera@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-9492-4275>

Simon Nganga Wanjala is lecturer in the Department of Literature, Linguistics, Foreign Languages and Film Studies, School of Arts and Social Sciences at Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya.

Email: simonnganga@mu.ac.ke

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0996-0150>

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we aim to extend the conceptualisation of gender as a negotiated concept and to find out more about circumcision ceremonies and gendered relations within the postcolonial Bukusu interactional setting.

The Bukusu circumcision ceremony held during every even year forms part of the cultural rites among the Bukusu people. There are other practices like naming, funeral events, and wedding ceremonies, among others. Our concern for this article is the circumcision event which is characterised by different speech actions centred on the 'cut' as a rite of passage. Specifically, we focus on conversations that take place in many locations within the speech event. Participants—both male and female—use this platform to talk about themselves as they are presented by the society. They therefore introduce several aspects of their identities, then discuss and contest them. The Bukusu society is essentially patriarchal, with men presented as superior to women, and in this context, therefore, gender has links to power.

The young male members must undergo this rite as a transition to adulthood. Thus, different speech actions dramatize the socio-biological transition of the young men to adulthood. The event is characterised by speech actions before, during, and after the event. The pre-event actions are mainly preparatory in nature as they instil courage, a hallmark of adult life.

Before, during, and after this event, initiates learn about various issues concerning the Bukusu tradition. It prepares the youth for marriage life in the community and orientates them to practise the norms and values through several activities: singing, dancing, drinking, and other interactional contexts. For instance, they are taught how to be men and how men conduct themselves in the society.

In our study, gender is defined in line with Coates's notion of 'selves' as a term applying to "a wide range of ways of being" and ways in which these "ways of being" are enacted in discourses (285). Unlike Coates, in this article we do not privilege femininity. Instead, we argue, together with Pavlenko and Blackledge, that gender, like all identities, happens at the interstice of being male and being female, being old and being young, being rich and being poor, and so on. Thus, in the enactment of 'selves', female interactants do not necessarily assume female roles, they also pick male roles, and the way they pick these roles reveals how they construct, align, and even contest traditional roles assigned to them. This sets our study apart from studies that privilege gender or treat gender one-sidedly as a dominant correlate over other correlates.

The dynamism in the construction of gender has been linked to conversation among men and women. However, studies in pragmatics into gendered relations as interactional accomplishments reveal interesting results and show that, in some cases, asymmetrical gender relations can also emerge in discourses that involve negotiations such as TV debates by Kotthoff. Implied within this understanding is the view that interactional gender studies have to do with "reconstructing the relevance of social difference in context" (Kotthoff 139). This is especially the case when gender is viewed, partly in the sense of Kotthoff following from Goffman, as a "category of the social order, and not the person". Emphasising the role of power in the process of categorisation, in this article we propose to go beyond the dichotomous or binary view to an understanding of gender as a hybrid concept (Pavlenko and Blackledge 13).

The two contrasting perspectives on gender can be related to two major phases in the development in gender studies: the *structural approach*, which focuses on gender as "a process embedded in social structure", and the *constructionist approach*, which gives "attention to the gendered dynamics of language, speech and everyday interaction" (Thorne 3–5). As both perspectives contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of gender, we have opted for a combination of the structural approach and the constructionist approach in order to see the parts in interplay and how they are revealed. We propose the post-structural perspective in order to illuminate ways in which particular gendered identities are "legitimized and devalued" in the context of the Bukusu circumcision ceremony.

We begin with a brief description of the data and setting, followed by an extension of discussions about literature related to gender studies, which are embedded in the context of recent poststructuralist perspectives. This is followed by a brief discussion of critical discourse analysis theory and its relevance. After a brief methodological discussion regarding the data, identification of linguistic means, analysis, and ethical considerations, the section that follows will show how participants use them. The next section, organised under themes and hence divided into two parts (construction of gender and gender contestations), will focus on how linguistic resources are used. This will be followed by the conclusion.

Theoretical specifications and method

Relatively deep research on gender, especially by the first and second wave of feminists, adopted a binary approach, with emphasis on why one gender was superior to the other. The feminist studies following socio-psychological and variational approaches aimed at investigating the “socially acquired characteristics which are perceived as masculine and feminine” (Talbot 7). With this hierarchical perspective, these studies presented men as dominant. Recently, however, studies adopting a poststructuralist approach, especially by third and fourth wave feminists, have tended to approach gender as a construct. Thus, these studies have focused on how men and women construct and negotiate their different roles.

The need for the change in approach has been articulated in literature. For instance, Mills, following Crawford, asserts that gender should be viewed as something which is enacted or performed and, thus, is a potential site of struggle over perceived restrictions in roles. This argument is relevant for this study as we examine how gender is negotiated within the patriarchal Bukusu setting. Our view is in line with Mills’s argument, as we do not subscribe to the perception created within literature (especially in this context) that male and female members pick assigned roles passively. Rather, participants actively construct and negotiate their roles.

The argument above implies that even within a context such as the Bukusu circumcision ceremony, male and female members ‘do’ gender. This is especially the case when gender is viewed in terms of a continuum of roles or ‘selves’. In line with this view, Coates argues that the ‘selves’ are located in discourses and that it is within these discourses that individuals perform their individual selves. Together with Coates, we argue that the performance of selves is an active process and that, even in cases where women pick their roles, they do so through negotiation that opens room for contestation. Coates’s argument is important for this study because circumcision ceremonies are discourses that allow participants to access different roles. We therefore define these roles by looking at the different tokens of interactions.

This study uses Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA) which helps to uncover the role of language in the definition of gender roles and power with emphasis on how the two social practices are negotiated in interactions. According to Phillips and Hardy, CDA is useful in order to analyse the connection between power and meaning and to grasp those processes by which social constructions lead to taken-for-granted social realities. Moreso, CDA explicitly explains the dynamics of power, knowledge, and ideology that surround discursive processes (Phillips and Hardy 20). For Fairclough (59), CDA focuses on the role of discourse in the way that the abuses of power are constituted and sustained. It explores the nature of persuasion, ideology, and conflict. Practically, CDA is useful for analysing how communicative strategies are shaped by and help shape contexts.

At the text level we shall look at what is represented in the text. Here, the analysis is descriptive and, in many ways, described as a form of linguistic analysis of texts in that texts are analysed by looking at the language used to identify “representations [and] categories of participant[s]” and how they construct identity or relations as participants (Fairclough 58). The second dimension of CDA is process analysis and emphasises the interpretation of data. The analysis objective is to unpack the message which refers to identifying the constructed “social identities”, “social relationships”, and “knowledge” and “concepts” and to understand and interpret the relationship between the data and its producers. The third dimension is social realities in a wider dimension, which involves the connecting of the discursive practices to the otherwise taken-for-granted social realities. With these three dimensions we are able to draw a clear relationship between language and society, discourse and society, and power and the invested ideologies.

Talk in interaction is the basis for Conversation Analysis (henceforth CA). In this article, we use foundations of CA in the analysis of data alongside CDA. Sacks’s concern of talk in interaction is the nature of turn taking in interaction: how it is organised, how participants accomplish order or disorder, and the resources used in accomplishment. Sacks also talks about inferential order of talk. This is in reference to the kinds of cultural and interpretive resources participants rely on in order to understand one another. The four areas CA is based on are: adjacency and preference structures, the rules of turn-taking, the management of overlapping talk, and repair and correction in conversation.

While CDA allows us to focus on discursive structures and how they reveal the construction and negotiation of gender, CA helps us to structure our data and to see how the turn-taking machinery aids in the process of synchronisation of gender relations.

In this study we analyse the use of language by male and female participants in conversations that constitute the Bukusu circumcision ceremony, a bi-annual ceremony that marks the transition of young male members of the

community from childhood to adulthood. Four speakers—two female and two male—were selected on the basis of their regular participation in the ceremonies. At the time of recording their ages fell between 20 and 40 years. They were all born and brought up in Bungoma County. On separate occasions each of the four participants held conversations which were recorded.

Participants were approached by the researchers and asked to request their friends to take part in research that involved recording of conversations. We wanted to have a naturalistic setting and the person carrying the recorder was a participant in the conversations. The setting of conversations during the circumcision ceremony was chosen because conversations around ceremonies involving the rite of passage of male members have links to power and are, therefore, more likely to capture conversation as it happens in a natural setting and can create ideal opportunities for power relations to be negotiated—and even contested—by participants. Having sought their oral consent, the researcher gave the participants a voice recorder and asked them to switch it on at the onset of the conversation and off at the end. During analysis of data real names of the participants were not used.

Each conversation lasted between 30 minutes and one hour (all recorded materials added up to five hours in total). Since the conversations took place at night, their awareness of being recorded reduced constrain on their conversational behaviour as we thought night time would make them free to talk about a range of taboo-related topics. For instance, the interactants discussed a range of topics, including those they would not discuss in public, such as sexual relations. The study examined how the participants constructed and negotiated gender on all four occasions.

All conversations were transcribed by the researchers and analysed closely with focus on turn allocation, sentence initial and final features, questions, and imperatives, in order to find out how the participants construct and negotiate gender. As the participants used the Lubukusu language and we have included a translation as well as the transcription.

Negotiating gender in conversations

We now turn to the question of how gender is constructed and negotiated in the Bukusu circumcision ceremony. Organising the section following emerging themes, we begin with how gender is constructed.

Constructing gender

The following excerpt follows a discussion on what circumcision means. Below the interactants focus on the circumcision song sung in the morning shortly before the act.

A: *Sioyayo sie khukhwama ebukhocha*
Sibechange na maana sina

The circumcision song from the uncle's place
Normally has which significance

B: *Sie khukhwama ebukhocha sili nende maana*
engali sana engali sana eli engali sana

That comes from the uncle's place has a lot of
Significance, a lot of it, it is a lot of it

Participant A begins his contribution with a question, which is completed by participant B; thus, the entire excerpt constitutes what Sacks calls an adjacency pair. With the locative *ebukhocha* (the uncle's side), the mother of the candidate is identified. With the locative the mother's side is metonymically constructed in terms one of the relations, i.e., the uncle. The locative also becomes part of what Antaki and Widdicombe call categorisation, i.e., the maternal side is identified with a key feature of the entire ceremony (the song), and this implies that the circumcision ceremony is only complete with participation from both sides: the paternal and the maternal sides. With the use of repetition, the significance identified by the word *maana* is constructed and highlighted.

In the recording from which the second excerpt was transcribed, the participants spoke about how people behave when they are offered a drink. In the excerpt they discuss what well-prepared beer implies.

A: *Mala akano kayile kafwana omukoyi mawe yo omwana*

And this is ripe (beer) it looks like the one prepared by the initiate's mother

B: *Kalaya kari eli mbo omwana alema embalu bulayi sana*

When ripe like this, it is that the initiate will endure the 'cut' very well

With *akano kayile* (this brew is ready), participant A constructs a category identified with the brewing of beer, and with *kafwana omukoyi mawe* (looks like the brewer is the mother), the female gender is revealed as a category of members of the community who brew beer. The success of the initiate is indicated by the quality of beer as shown in *Mala kalaya kari eli mbo omwana alema embalu bulayi sana* (The ripeness of the brew indicates that the initiate will bear the circumcision successfully). This excerpt serves to show the metonymic understanding of circumcision in terms of beer and the success of the ceremony in terms of the making of good beer. Other than showing the role played by the participants, the conversation also shows how, through conversations, participants self-categorise themselves in line with the roles they perform.

In the third excerpt Manguye (a pseudonym for a circumciser) counsels his son:

Saa hii kumwinyao mbao ta

Ne buli buri bwe ku-mao

There's no playing/joking now

If it is fear then that has been inherited from your mother

In this short excerpt, Manguye categorises women as a group of people who fear, by saying *nebuli buri bwe kumao* (if it is cowardice, it is your mother's). With *kumwinyao mbao* (no games), Manguye associates failure to withstand circumcision with games or a lack of seriousness. This lack of seriousness is further associated with fear. Thus, the female gender is constructed as a category of non-serious and cowardly people. As this example shows in conversations, participants within the Bukusu circumcision ceremony construct their roles and with these roles categories emerge. The categories are further negotiated and synchronised as we show in the next section.

Negotiating gender

The following excerpt follows a brief discussion on how people behave when they see beer (a feature of the circumcision ceremony). Below, one participant expresses his interest in drinking.

A: *Ese mbelesie busa sipoko nywelema.*

Sendi nende chisa che khulinda tawe

Give me the cup. I want to drink from it.

I don't have time to wait

B: *Ewe wes ba anga basecha babasio kamalwa*

Ke mubasinde kabechanga kamanulu nebarengkhe

Bipoko lekhela bakhasi ... nibo barengkha barie?

You be like fellow men. Circumcision beer

Is sweeter when taken from the pot

Leave the cups for women. How can they drink from the pot?

In the excerpt, the two interactants discuss beer and how one has to drink it. With the expression *basecha* (men), the male gender is constructed and with *kamalwa kabechanga kamanulu nebarengkhe* (beer is sweeter when set in a pot), the male gender is identified as a category of people who drink from the pot. Participant B advises participant A not to be like women who drink beer from cups/tins as is indicated by *bipoko lekhela bakhasi* (leave the cups/tins for women). Thus, with *ese mbelesie busa sipoko nywelema* (just give me a cup/tin I drink from it), participant A contextualises—at least according to B—the female gender identified as a category of people who drink beer

from a cup. That participant A offers to drink from the cup since he does not have time as indicated by *sendi ne chisa chekhulinda tawe* (I don't have time to wait), implies that certain circumstances necessitate the assumption of roles assigned to the female gender. Thus, B's contribution is meant to persuade A to follow laid down roles as indicated by *ba nga basecha babandi* (be like other men), and B backs up the argument by stating that wine taken from the pot is sweeter (indicated by *kabechanga kamanulu ne barengkehhe*) and ordering that cups should be left to the female gender (as indicated by *bipoko lekhela bakhasi*). The final rhetorical question *nibo barengkha barie* (how can they drink it from the pot?) indicates a fixed social order and a prefabricated place for women.

In the next excerpt, three female participants are sitting outside the house as they listen to the father advising the candidate. Then they engage in the following conversation.

A: *Mala ese naiulilakho basecha nebapa lukalakala
namwe Manguye kakhobolelanga omwana ali sina?*

And have I ever heard that men ululate?
Or what was Manguye telling the initiate

B: *Si-kalakal si bakhasi, mayi wo mwana niye
onyoanga nekapa sikalakala basecha balelo bali
nende siungu namwe?*

Ululation is for women. The initiate's mother is the one
Who begins ululating. Are the men of today
Mad or what?

In the excerpt, the female participants are talking about what Manguye tells the candidate, his son. With the question *Mala ese naiulilakho basecha nepaba lukalakala?* (Have I ever had that men ululate?), participant A introduces the conversation. Embedded in the question is the contextualisation of the female gender as indicated by *nepaba lukalakala* (they ululate). This is a role that is traditionally assigned to women. Thus, through the categorisation based on what women are supposed to do, the female gender is revealed. The initial question therefore shows surprise at what Manguye, a man, tells his son as is shown in *namwe manguye kakhobolelanga omwana ali si* (or what has Manguye been telling the child). The fact that a man pledges to ululate after a successful ceremony is picked up by participant B who specifies the gender of those who ululate: *sikalakala sie bakhasi* (ululation is for women) and *mayi wo mwana niye onyoanga nekapa sikalakala* (the child's mother is the one that begins to ululate). B ends the contribution by criticism captured in the statement *basecha ba lelo bali nende siungu namwe* (are today's men mad or what?). This excerpt is an illustration of the many instances in the conversations around the Bukusu circumcision ceremony that show that gender is not just contextualised, but that men and women engage in negotiations through which they discuss, evaluate, and in some cases accept what is traditionally assigned to them. This negotiation goes on in the excerpt below where the third person picks the idea raised above and comments on it.

C: *Wakana sebaelewa sikila nekhupang sikalakala tawe.
Ese mayi anga neyaba nebakheba omutuwa owange
yaani naba nekamariarani, buri bwaba bwechule mu-nda
mayi mala lasima bali mayi wo omwana alambisia
busa paka sichiriba sipe aba omwana kemile embalu*

Perhaps they do not understand why we ululate
For me when they were circumcising my last-born son
I was very worried, my mother
And it was a must that the initiate's mother sits
Till the whistle is blown, an indication that the initiate has undergone the cut

D: *Ese mala engorwa nenyala bali khulambisia busa paka
omwana keme embalu*

I don't know if I can sit
Till the initiate endures that cut

B: *Mala onyala busa, babukusu balomanga bali
okhukonia akhila okhusikha. Olanga balebe
bakhwikhasia, bakhutula engubo nende kumoyo.*

The one that lays you is better than the one that buries you. You call relatives
You can. Bukusu people say
To be with you, to hold your dress and your heart

C: *Lekha khulinde mukha manguye muchuli
Khumulolele...
okhachekhenga
babandu tawe okhakanyale?...*

Let's wait and see Manguye's wife tomorrow
whispers
Always do not mock
Other people. Will you manage it?

In this excerpt participant C also levels their criticism framed as a reason why some men ululate: *Wakana sebaelewa sikila nekhupanga sikalakala tawe* (Maybe they do not understand why we ululate). Participant C cites a lack of understanding on the part of men as a reason why some men ululate, and she explains why women ululate using her own personal experience. According to participant C, ululation comes at the point when the circumciser blows the whistle, an indication for the successful completion of circumcising. The whistle therefore serves to break the worry that mothers experience as they wait to hear the news, as is shown in *naba ne kamariarani* (I was worried) and *buri bwaba bwechule munda* (I had a lot of worry). The whistle also signals the end of a period of obligatory waiting as shown in *mala bali lasima mayi wo mwana alambisia paka sichiriba sipe* (and that the candidate's mother must sit and wait for the whistle). Participant D picks the argument offered by C, i.e., that the child's mother must sit and wait. D seems to be a mother who has never experienced this, as is shown in *ese mala engorwa nenyala bali mayi wo mwana alambisia paka sichiriba sipe* (I don't know if I can; that the child's mother must sit until the whistle is blown). Participant B focuses on D's inability and encourages her with *mala onyala busa* (you can just manage it). With the proverb *okhukonia akhila okhusikha* (one that lays you is better than one that buries you), B constructs the Bukusu understanding of circumcision as an important element of reproduction, i.e., the child is a product of sex and circumcision prepares the child for reproduction through sex. With the argument that one is never alone, as shown in *olanga balebe bakhwikhasia, bakhutula engubo ne kumoyo* (you call relatives to be with you, to hold your cloth and heart), B further encourages participant D. C's contribution ends with *okhachekhanga babandu ta okhakanyale* (do not jest at others; will you manage it?), suggesting that Manguye's wife ridicules other

women and now it is her turn to act out the role. It is also a warning to the other participants not to deride others. This excerpt, like others, indicates that gender roles are not just picked, but that they are handed down through negotiations. The negotiation serves to encourage those who doubt their ability and to warn those who mock others.

Conversation data in this article, as well as many instances in the recordings, show that the Bukusu circumcision ceremony is punctuated by conversations that take place in many places.

Conclusion

In this article we have shown, first and foremost, that gender categories emerging in the context of the Bukusu circumcision ceremony are based on roles that individual members of the community are assigned or assign themselves. Secondly, the constructed roles are negotiated before being accepted and/or rejected. Examples in the article have shown that women are constructed as participants who brew local beer, sing the circumcision song the first time, and are by nature non-serious and cowardly. Women are further constructed as those who ululate and sit and wait for men to perform the actual circumcision. On other hand, men are by implication categorised as participants who taste and gauge the quality of beer, sing the circumcision song afterwards, and are brave. These categories are, as we have shown, fine-tuned or negotiated through the conversations with the aim of encouraging others, contesting what the next gender enacts, and criticising those who show a lack of commitment. In this article, we have raised the need for research on gender in the Bukusu context to get beyond essentialisation characterised by a hierarchical approach to gender. Instead, we propose that gender is best understood in the context of how it emerges through roles and how it is negotiated, accepted, and/or contested.

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