

Investigating Linguistic Sexism in Popular Ilokano Songs

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Abstract

This study investigates linguistic sexism within the lyrics of ten popular Ilokano songs using Sarah Mills' feminist stylistics framework. Analysis focused on both word-level and discourse-level elements, exploring how gender roles and biases are embedded in song lyrics. Despite the pervasive presence of gendered language in many cultures, this research reveals that the selected Ilokano songs largely employ gender-neutral language and portray both male and female characters without obvious bias. The absence of gendered generic words and balanced descriptions of characters challenge traditional views on linguistic sexism in Ilokano, a language spoken by millions in the Philippines and globally. These findings contribute to broader discussions on language and gender, suggesting that linguistic practices in Ilokano songs may reflect evolving societal norms around gender equality.

Keywords: linguistic sexism, Ilokano songs, feminist stylistics, gender-neutral language, discourse analysis

INTRODUCTION

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis states that language constrains and shapes our thoughts and perceptions (Herdero 2007, 88). It is one of the pioneering theories that sparked debates and investigations about the relationship between language and how we view reality. However, it is vital to point out two forms of the theory: the 1) Strong version: language determines how we interpret the world, and the 2) Weak version: language is only one factor in how we construct the world (Pauwels 1998, 83).

This Linguistic Determinism Theory suggests that language controls our perception of the world (Mills 1995, 84) as supported by Holmes (2008, 350) who believes that language to some extent affects our worldview and consequently the way we view gender. Spender (1980, 97) argues that those with power, which we traditionally ascribe to men, have the ability to create language and consequently reality. She argues that sexist language enables sexist worldviews (1980, 96). The same observation was pointed out by Prewitt-Freilino, Caswell, and Laakso (2012, 278) who studied that countries that speak gendered languages have less gender equality than countries where natural gender or genderless languages are spoken.

Linguistic sexism is defined as ‘the practice whereby someone foregrounds gender when it is not the most salient feature’ in a discourse (Vetterling-Braggin 1991). This kind of sexism is apparent in the English language, as investigated by Mills (1995, 87), as well as in other languages in the world as investigated in the following:

1. Spanish (Jiménez Rodrigo, Onsalo, and Cortes 2011),
2. Norwegian (Blakar 1977), French (Yaguello 1978),
3. German (Guentherodt et al. 1980; Hellinger and Schräpel 1983),
4. German (Guentherodt et al. 1980; Hellinger and Schräpel 1983).

More recently, the documentation of gender bias has spread to languages such as Chinese, Icelandic, Lithuanian, Italian, Japanese, Polish, and Thai (Hellinger and Bussman 2001; Pauwels 1998).

Linguistic sexism, conveyed within language, is likewise found in other languages and exists in many forms (Pauwels 1998, 16). This kind of sexism is present in the English language, for example, through the generic use of masculine words such as “chairman” or “salesman” (Mills 1995, 87). Another example is the asymmetrical method of describing a female and male person, by describing women through their appearance more often than men (Mills 1995, 162).

Despite the differing opinions, some believe that language only reflects the society we live in, while others take on the perspective of linguistic determinism. Linguistic determinism suggests that language controls our perception of the world (Mills 1995, 84). If one agrees to

some extent that language use is related to and has an impact on reality, it is clear why the study of linguistic sexism is important in a world where gender equality still has not been reached and where an “inclusive and equitable sharing of power and opportunity” remains an elusive dream for the most part.

With this being said, Mills (1995, 17) claims that gender is a present factor in texts and that it needs to be exposed and dealt with. Mills (1995) provides a feminist model for textual analysis with tools to identify gender representation in any text at the level of word, sentence, and discourse. She argues that the exposure of linguistic sexism is one of the approaches necessary to change sexist structures in society (Mills 2008, 159).

Background

A song, despite being literary and brings amusement to people, it is often used to foreground a particular ideology (Setyono and Sri Wahyuni 2012). Songs are created not just for entertainment purposes but to initiate a particular ideological message or philosophical thought, children’s character education; criticize government decisions; criticize a social phenomenon; maintain, propagate, and perpetuate the existing worldview of the people with respect to gender. In so doing, a substantive glimpse of the people’s perceptions will be revealed since language and gender are deeply intertwined components of culture (Ihejirika 2014).

The Ilokano language is a thriving language of more than 15 million people being the lingua franca of the Northern Philippines, parts of Central Luzon, and NCR, as well as parcels of Visayas and Mindanao regions. Presently, there is a large number of Ilokano speakers in Guam, Alaska, California, Washington, Hawaii, Texas, New York, Nevada, and New Jersey, all in the United States. In other parts of the world, a huge number of Ilokano speakers are found in Canada, Europe, the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia (UH Manoa 2019).

Ilokano is spoken as a first language by some seven (7) million people, primarily in Northern Luzon specifically the Ilocos and Cagayan Valley Regions (Luzano 2018, 1). It is also spoken as a second language by possibly another two (2) million speakers in the northern areas of Luzon as a lingua franca in trade, commerce, and everyday

communication (Pacris 2018). Admittedly, the Ilokano language is the vehicle of the Ilokano culture, tradition, and ideology as embodied in their history, literature, and songs (Rambaud 2015).

Aim, scope, and research questions

As an Ilokano language speaker and writer, and at the same time an English language teacher, the desire on my part to partake in this renewed focus on language and gender studies aligned with the intent of unraveling the possibilities of the existence of sexism, not only on the English language and Filipino language or the language of the center but also on the languages on the periphery. Regional literatures prompted me to undertake this study. I wish to use this opportunity to study the nuances of the English language side by side with the Ilokano language.

This study aims to examine sexism in the language use of the lyrics of ten (10) popular Ilokano songs by using Sarah Mills's feminist stylistics framework. The feminist stylistics toolkit was provided almost twenty years ago, and this study examines if it is still possible to detect linguistic sexism using this method. The scope is limited to the analysis of the lyrics of ten (10) popular Ilokano songs which are freely translated by this researcher with consultation/reference to dictionaries and references when the need arose just to validate and/or verify the accuracy of the translation.

To fulfill the aim of the study, the following research questions are addressed:

1. How, if at all, is linguistic sexism expressed in the lyrics of popular Ilokano songs at the word level?
2. How, if at all, is linguistic sexism expressed in the lyrics of popular Ilokano songs at the discourse level?
3. How, if at all, is the language use affected by the singer-composer's background in terms of sexism in language use?

Research Framework

Feminist stylistics is a theory and method presented by Mills (1995) used for analyzing texts by focusing on the way gender is

represented in a given text. Mills' framework (1995, 2) could be used for analyzing any text to discover gender differences, songs included. This framework also builds on work from other feminist linguists such as Cameron (1985 cited in Mills 1995, 15) and Coates (1986 cited in Mills 1995, 15).

Mills' framework suggests that sexism can be determined by focusing on some linguistic features: such as 1) gendered generic words, 2) naming practices, and 3) how female and male characters are described. Now for this paper, only the first and the third are analyzed due to the lack of naming practices and conventions indicated in the corpus or lyrics of the ten (10) popular Ilokano songs.

In addition, Mills (1995, 21) proposed that linguistic sexism could be analyzed at three levels in a text, which are as follows: 1) word-level analysis, 2) sentence-level analysis, and 3) discourse-level analysis. However, for this investigation, only the word-level and discourse-level analyses were undertaken.

Aside from analyzing texts at different levels, Mills (1995, 31-43) argues for a feminist text analysis model that includes the context of production and reception in the analysis. Mills (1995, 31) places the author as a central factor in the context of production since the author has an important role in the choice of language used within the lyrics of the songs. Hence, the background of the singer-composer would figure prominently in the corpus analysis in this investigation. This is because of the actual gender of the singer-composer itself as the lyrics of the songs correspond to the entire worldview including the treatment and depiction of gender in the use of language in the form of the lyrics of the popular Ilokano songs.

Research Data

The 10 Popular Ilokano Songs

The research data for this study features the ten (10) Popular Ilokano songs from Track #1 through Track #10 of the album *Demy Q* released in 1983 as Album Number 56 aptly titled *Ti Ari ken ti Prinsesa* (The King and the Princess) Volume 1. It was arranged by Eliseo B. Contillo and was released by Republic Records Philippines in 1983.

Figure 1

Demy Q's Album No. 56 which features the ten popular Ilokano songs (Tracks 1 through 10)



The album was not on Ilokano folksongs but rather belonged to the contemporary genre. It was initially available via cassette medium and now, it was uploaded to the video-sharing site YouTube.com as a recording collection of Rudy Contillo (2016) found at the Uniform Resource Locator (URL) <https://youtu.be/2kTxGKf9y98>.

The lyrics of the ten (10) Popular Ilokano songs and the corresponding free translation were in consultation with the Ilokano Dictionaries of Laconsay (1993), Agcaoili (2011), and Constantino (1971) as well as the contemporary online Google dictionary. These can be accessed through this link https://drive.google.com/file/d/1EwleXyijzB_UasCfpUA340jDsItBM3Ex/view?usp=sharing.

The album entitled Demy Q Album #56 includes the ten (10) selected tracks namely:

- Track # 1 Daksanggasatak Unay (I am most Devastated)*
- Track # 2 Sadag ken Amin Ko (My Pillar and My Everything)*
- Track # 3 Dika Aglawlaweng (Don't Waste Your Time)*
- Track # 4 Kapungan (Other Half)*
- Track # 5 No Umisem Ka (When you Smile)*
- Track # 6 Awandan Da Karim (Your Lost Promises)*
- Track # 7 Tunggal Darikmat (Every Moment)*

Track # 8 Dikanto Agbabawi (You Won't Regret)

Track # 9 Ti Lalaki (A Man)

Track # 10 Mangnamnama Ka (You can Count on Me)

The Singer behind the Songs

The singer, Engr. Demetrio A. Quirino Jr., (a.k.a. 'Demy Q') is a Civil Engineer and educator who founded the Technological Institute of the Philippines in 1962. An Ilokano hailing from Nueva Vizcaya province, he topped the Civil Engineering board exam after graduating from National University. Demy Q is known as the '*King of Ilocano Songs*' ascribed by Marilyn Contillo in her article entitled "*Demy Quirino: The King of Ilocano Songs*" (1999) published in the Philippine Graphic magazine.

Figure 2

Engr. Demetrio A. Quirino Jr is more popularly known as 'Demy Q' among the Ilokano Folks



Reputable music enthusiasts touted Demy Q the "*Jose Mari Chan of Ilocandia*" due to their similar musical style, vocal timbre, and vocal range. Demy Q, apart from being a Civil engineer and educator, spends his leisure time recording songs in English, Tagalog, and Ilokano. In fact, he owns one of the most technologically advanced recording studios in the metro at that time (Lahoz, 2005).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Word-level Analysis

Gendered generic words

The ten popular Ilokano song lyrics analyzed showed no use of gendered generic words, at least in the original Ilokano lyrics and their original meaning. The word “man” was not used when referring to both women and men. There was never any instance of sexist or gender-biased reference throughout the lyrics of the ten popular Ilokano songs. Of noticeable feature of the lyrics was the use of gender-neutral pronouns such as “I”, “my”, “you”, and especially the “we” which I find very inclusive and not othering any gender at all. This is a very surprising revelation in this investigation since I always have had this impression of Ilokano being a sexist language just like any other language such as English, and most especially Spanish which had greatly influenced Ilokano.

Now, there is one word, which is “Fatherland,” featured in the translated lyrics of the third song/track “Dika Aglawlaweng” (Don’t Waste Your Time) in the Chorus part, and this I think is gendered in a way that pertains to the gender or sex of the nation identified as a male one which clearly is sexist.

In the corpus of the study, the Ilokano language for fatherland is “*pagilian*” which is rooted in the “*ili*,” a gender-neutral term for “town.” My free translation of this Ilokano word into *Fatherland* is clearly influenced by Western conceptualization of what a nation is, and this is more of a case of translation issue rather than linguistic sexism.

Discourse-level analysis

Moving on to discourse-level analysis, the song lyrics were analyzed as to how female and male characters are described/presented. As previously mentioned, the features investigated at this level could be argued as belonging to word level. However, it is Mills’ (1995) division that is used, and they are therefore placed at discourse level.

Describing female and male characters by relationship to others

As Mills (1995, 160) argues, stereotypical beliefs are often visible in the description of female and male characters. Defining women by

their relationship with others is an example of how stereotypes are reflected in texts such as song lyrics. Relevant to analyzing female and male characters' descriptions in the lyrics of the ten popular Ilokano songs is, therefore, how often they refer to their relationship with others. The categories chosen for this analysis were mother/father, man/woman, or lady.

Interestingly, the only iterations of the words "Mother and Father" in the third track/song entitled "Dika Aglawlaweng" (Don't Waste your Time) are never considered to be sexist since they do not put prejudice and undue preference to one over another (Vetterling-Braggin 1991). These results do not consistently fall with previously mentioned theories suggesting that women stereotypically are seen as more connected with relationships (Heilman 2012, 705) as there is seemingly a balanced treatment of denoting parenthood to both the father and the mother without necessarily burdening the mother or the female gender at all. The frequency of the woman being referred to as mother equal to that of the man being referred to as father indicates that parenthood is balanced in the case of the corpus of the lyrics of the songs; these do not fit into what Mills (2008, 127) categorized as parenthood being more often assigned to women than men.

Describing female and male characters by appearance

Included within the area of describing female and male characters is the practice of labeling women by their appearance. Mills (1995, 162) argues that female characters tend to be labeled by their appearance, while men are more often described by their personalities.

In the track/song #4 entitled "Kapungan" (My Other Half), we can see the "lady" was described by the singer/composer/lyricist as "A modest lady, Industrious and trustworthy, Is the woman of my dreams, To be my other half in this life" presented both in terms of her appearance and personality which clearly do not fall under the classification of being sexist (Mills 1995, 162). The balanced description of the lady continues throughout the song, "She may not be rich, but her love is true; Her skin may not be as white, but her heart is clear and pure." And especially in the final stanza: "She is with me all throughout, In poorest and in riches, Hand-in-hand, we face tomorrow, We embrace our future together." Such a balanced and nuanced description of appearance

and personality is again something unexpected on my part since I have this pre-disposition that women/ladies are generally presented or described in terms of their appearance but not in this corpus of ten popular Ilokano song lyrics.

Singer-Composer-Lyricist background

Another important concern to be addressed in this investigation is the context of production in what Mills (1995, 31) refers to as a feminist model of text. Relevant to this study, as mentioned earlier, is the role of the singer-composer-lyricist in the course of the song production. It is the individual singer-composer-lyricist, Engr. Demetrio A. Quirino, who to some extent decides which type of language is used in the lyrics of the songs contained in one of his many albums. The author of a text is in her/his turn affected by factors such as literary conventions and trends and publishing factors (Mills 1995, 31). However, no language guidelines have been found for the production and publication of the songs contained in the said album. Being an engineer, educator, philanthropist, and constitutionalist proved to be a deciding factor in his choice of linguistic terms used to write the lyrics of his songs (Lahoz, 2005). The results of the investigation regarding the absence of gendered generic words as well as the balanced description of male and female characters in terms of appearance and personality provide for the possibility of avoidance if not total elimination of virtually sexist words in a set of published works such as, for this investigation, a set or album of popular Ilokano songs.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results and discussion above, it is found that the lyrics of the ten (10) popular Ilokano songs of Engr. Demetrio A. Quirino Jr., more popularly known as *Demy Q*, contained well-thought-out lyrics that feature gender-neutral and gender-inclusive words, descriptions, and terminologies that are not sexist or biased toward one gender. Employing Mills Feminist Stylistic analysis, the results of word-level analysis as well as in the discourse-level analyses regarding the absence of gendered generic words as well as the balanced description of male and female characters in terms of appearance and personality provide for the possibility of avoidance if not total elimination of virtually sexist

words in a set of published works such as, for this investigation, a set or entire album of popular Ilokano songs.

These findings are presumably affected by the type of research data or text corpus analyzed. The song lyrics were created in a very controlled way or manner of composition in terms of having a set of linguistic and lexical choices among a specific repertoire of meanings and ideas the singer-composer-lyricist had at his disposal. As stated earlier, the selected ten popular Ilokano song lyrics were all created by Engr. Demetrio A. Quirino Jr., who was known to be a well-educated and gender-sensitive person as attested by Contillo (1999) and Lahoz (2005), features such gender-sensitive choice of lexical items, which are, therefore, expected of his song lyrics and similar write-ups he may have written or created.

To further validate the findings of this study, it is highly recommended to expand the repertoire of data to be subjected to the same analysis to include among others news reports, advertisements, and other similar texts and linguistic outputs. This research may be broadened in its scope and some limitations in the area of ethnolinguistic anthropology as well as studies on language translations and may be improved to make it more comprehensive.

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