

French influence on English in Togo

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Evaluation of the expression of gendered language

1. Introduction

This paper looks at English language use in law discourse and particularly in university classrooms in Togo. Togo makes extensive use of the English language despite the fact that it is a francophone country. English is taught in almost all public institutions, except for primary schools. Financial institutions, such as banks, make extensive use of English. This is evidenced at first glance at the large computer screens positioned at the entrances to these institutions. At the Université de Lomé alone, there are several ESP (English for Specific Purposes) programs. Each of the five faculties (with several departments) and ten schools and institutes have an ESP program. The ESP course is applicable to first-year students on BA programs and to those on MA programs. However, despite this extensive presence of English, traditional language norms and the influence of French on English in Togo in general are still very strong.

In this study, I also consider law discourse because at the dawn of the 21st century, Togo holds a lot of talks on human rights, covering practical issues concerning women, such as who owns land, economic sufficiency of women, women's leadership, and women in government or in politics. Against this background it may be interesting to see how language is being used to effect changes in human rights issues.

1.1 The problem

If little is being done in terms of human rights in Togo, at least there is a lot of talk on this issue. News broadcast on the radio, TV and in the local newspapers often contain several items that refer to human rights issues. The problem is that even though huge reforms are on the agenda and some have even

begun to be realized in some areas, the domain of the language itself often does not 'recognize' women.

1.2 Motivation and objective

I was motivated to write the current paper after listening to a conference talk in which the main speaker, a lawyer, articulated the words 'droit de l'homme ...' [literally, 'the right of men']. During the question section, I asked, why not 'droit de l'homme et de la femme?' ['Why not men's and women's rights?'] The audience laughed but he answered politely that this is how the expression is and it appears he cannot do much about it.

My objective in writing this article is to call for awareness to insert new or appropriate language expressions for human rights reforms. This should begin both on an individual basis and collectively. New insertions will replace the old language norms. This is because language expression counts for real change. The old texts may be what they are but when we in the 21st century pick up the texts

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and use them everywhere, especially in public places where appropriate norms should be reinforced, we as actors of change must make all effort to change the language and use adapted language forms. As it is popularly said in French, 'la répétition est pédagogique'. The repetition of old language norms amounts to little reform and only preserves old lifestyles in our brains. New gender-appropriate language expressions are needed in order to bring about awareness and changes of mind. The repetition of such expressions and their reinforcement will affect classroom teaching and assist students to store new vocabulary in their mental dictionaries and also retrieve this vocabulary as they talk and write. This practice of gender-appropriate language use will go a long way into other areas of life as well and will not be limited to the classroom context alone.

1.3 Previous studies on human rights and language use

There are extensive previous studies on human rights and language use and, for that matter, on women's rights and language. This section reports on only a selected few studies. For example, Coicaud, Doyle & Gardner (2003), Davis (2009), and Donnelly (2013) can be named. Donnelly (2013) discusses different state actions, including those of international bodies, in terms of human rights since World War Two. Donnelly (2013) pays attention to domestic policies and international relations. Coicaud, Doyle & Gardner (2003) focus on common international standards which serve as guidelines for the relationship between individuals and the institutions that govern them. The values that go into these standards have been agreed upon commonly as crucial for humanity as a whole. Human rights issues discussed in the book include civil, political and socioeconomic rights at the national, regional and international levels.

An essential part of these concerns has led to US policies on adopting non-sexist language in English. For example, in a news article entitled 'Washington state gets rid of sexist language', Zap (2013) reports that lawmakers acknowledge the difficulty of the task of adopting gender-neutral language, but that nevertheless the State of Washington has enacted legislation making changes to 40,000 words. *Freshman* is now *first-year student*, *fisherman* is now *fisher*, *penmanship* is now *handwriting*, *his* is now *his* and *hers*, *clergyman* is now *clergy*, *journeyman plumber* is now *journey-level plumber* and so on.

Zap (2013) also reports that Washington, Florida, North Carolina and Illinois have officially banned 'gender-biased language from the law' and that nine other States are considering taking similar action. Thus, human rights issues are affecting dialogue and discourse, with attempts being made to make gender-biased language disappear, and androcentric expressions are being replaced in English.

Research on gender has also addressed criticism of the way women talk. Women's language has long been an issue subject to criticism. Older works such as Jespersen (1922), Lakoff (1973) and others have criticized how women talk, highlighting women's insecurity, lack of public-intellectual vocabulary, exaggerated use of emotional adjectives and adverbs, hypercorrect and normative uses, etc. More recent works such as Holmes (1995) and Holmes & Meyerhoff (2003) certainly have changed in perspective and view language and gender within a much more interdisciplinary scope, where different modern views bear down on the issue of language. Some of these concerns explore issues of authenticity, i.e., who defines the meaning of a real woman or a real man (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2003:3); identity, i.e., processes involved in the emergence, effacement and disappearance of identities; and challenges involved when individuals try to find a place for themselves within societies.

However, the issue of the linguistic invisibility of women, as witnessed in conservative expressions (e.g. *man*, *he/his*, *chairman*, *freshman*, *man-kind*, *manpower*, *manmade*, *men of science* for both male and female), largely remains to be eradicated in much more conservative societies. The conservative norms are largely seen in traditional, older texts which were mostly written by men and thus favored the androcentric expressions.

1.4 Linguistic situation in Togo

Togo has had no real language policy since the 1975 education and language reforms. Before this year, the colonial language French was the only important official language. Given that Germany and Britain were also colonial masters, German and English were also taught in schools to a lesser degree. When the USA became a super-power and English therefore became the language of globalization and science, many African countries, including Togo, prioritized English in their schools (at higher and lower levels) and other sectors of their countries. Thus the local languages of Togo were not considered until the 1975 reform, when only two of the local languages (Kabiye and

Ewe), among the country's 36 or 44 languages (Apeli 2003; Takassi 1992), were given national status. Against all these, the French language, being the country's official language, enjoys a monopoly including the preservation of its gender-biased expressions.

The presence of these traditional norms is the main factor underlying the lack of real changes in English language teaching in Togo. In 'Techniques of Written English', 'Language, Sex, Gender, and Culture' and other courses, which the current author instructs, much emphasis is made on non-sexist language. However, the influence of French traditional gender norms is such that even in English classrooms where students are taught English language reforms, very little progress has been made in terms of using non-sexist language. Evidence for this situation is discussed in Section 2.

2. Gendered talk

In order to evaluate gender-neutral language use and, consequently, non-sexist language, I analyse data collected from two sources, namely, students' essays and law texts. Section 2.1 discusses university-level uses of English in the Togolese classroom. Section 2.2 shows data from law texts involving human rights issues. Suggestions formulated in the conclusion are part of the inductive enterprise which is based on the observed data.

2.1 University students' use of the English language in Togo

Table 1 represents a sample of data extracted from my BA and MA students' papers (the majority of the data are from the BA students). The BA students were asked to write a discursive essay while the MA students were asked to do a

Table 1: Students' responses to the following assessment questions. BA Topic: 'Should religion be part of the University curriculum? Discuss.' MA topic: 'Describe all that you know about the informant method of data collection'

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|-----|--|
| 1. | If there is need to teach religion, the duty should be left to religious men in their various respective religious centers. |
| 2. | So the omission of facts about religion can give students the wrong ideas about the religious life, about humankind and his manner to behave towards his fellows ... Furthermore, religious teaching in schools may create in students the fear of God towards his neighbor ... |
| 3. | For instance, a teacher is not supposed to teach students all religions. In fact, he does not know anything about those religions but he has only good knowledge about his own religion. |
| 4. | There is no model of religion ... there are no model rules. This is why every leader plans according to what he supposes to be correct ... Everybody wants his religion to be the model. |
| 5. | Firstly, religion, according to the general understanding, is a system made of faith, worship and belief; a set of precepts which need to be known and practiced by an individual for him to live in good terms with his God and his society ... |
| 6. | A teacher has to teach his subject in a pluralist manner ... |
| 7. | For example, ... when you work together and take an exam together and your mate gets a better grade, you won't envy or be jealous towards him because you know that it is his luck or God and next time you also work hard. |
| 8. | This shows that every student no matter their level or degree has his own religion and his way of worshipping. |
| 9. | ... humanity tries to recognize his creator by his faith ... We know that there are many domains in which a human being must do his research in order to have knowledge ... Everybody is free to choose his religionEvery student will know more about his religion ... |
| 10. | No one is at ease to be taught a religion which is different from his . |
| 11. | For example, we don't see God; he is invisible. |
| 12. | ... in the case of the introspection method, it is the researcher who uses his knowledge of the language to build his data. Also, in experimentation, the researcher works alone in his corner to get his results. |

description on data collection. The BA students are English majors who number a little over a hundred students in a mixed university school system. The MA students are linguistics majors who are instructed in English. No names or personal information are included for the protection of student identities. Three courses were observed for the examples, namely, 'Techniques of Written English', 'Language, Sex, Gender and Culture', and 'Data Collection'. Even though the table shows data from two topics assigned to students in a mixed-gender class, the writing illustrates a general trend observed over more than six years of teaching. Grammar has been corrected (to some extent) to facilitate reading and particular areas of gender have been bolded.

These types of expressions show gender bias. For instance, example (1) portrays and conserves the traditional mindset that only male adults, 'men', are religious and they only should teach this aspect of knowledge. Thus, while Togolese women are making a lot of progress by teaching religious matters, as some are evangelists, some pastors and some deacons in various Pentecostal, Presbyterian and Catholic churches, example (1), in a very subtle way, portrays and preserves old norms. This goes on in a classroom which is intellectually oriented and which needs to make a difference in order to bring about change. Example (2) could literally mean that all human beings are male and all their fellows are of the same sex. This again could imply that the woman is not a fellow human being to the male. Example (3) and (12) respectively portray teachers and researchers, and for that matter, Togolese teachers and researchers, as all of the male sex only. In reality, this is not true in Togo. Even though the number of female teachers is low compared to that of male teachers, female teachers exist significantly in the country. Example (4) could mean that every leader is male. Again, this is not true, at least in Togo. There are a few female ministers in the government; some women are lawmakers in parliament and others are in leadership positions as directors of institutions, companies and banks. Example (7) implies that all classmates are male, even within the mixed university classroom, while (8) entails that every student is male. Finally, example (11) perpetrates the traditional view that the Spiritual God is male.

2.2 Language use in the law in Togo

This section presents the current state of gendered talk in Togo seen in the law and judicial matters. The language is French with particular elements in bold. The data presented in [Table 2](#) come from

Revue Togolaise des Sciences Juridiques (2012) (hereafter, RTSJ).

Examples (1) and (2) show that different expressions exist in French and that specific talk such as 'droit de la femme' and 'droit de l'homme' can be used where the focus is solely female or male. This specificity makes the language non-biased and non-sexist. The remaining examples in the table portray French language as sexist. Examples (7) to (9) seem to be traditional texts or expressions that current users just repeat without considering alternative uses. These traditional expressions can be traced back to statements within the declaration of independence (by Thomas Jefferson) of the USA, and adopted in 1776. Togolese authors report and comment on these. However, the language has not changed a bit from 1776 to the current uses. The 'all men are created equal ...' discourse which did not include women (since they did not gain full suffrage in the USA until 1920), has preserved the male-centric language in French, which is still very sexist. Finally, in example (10), the expression 'tout citoyen' translates as a male populated country where the Constitution talks to men only and excludes females. In other words, the expression 'tout citoyen et toute citoyenne' would have been used if the purpose was to include women.

3. Evaluation of the situation and suggestions for change

The analysis of data presented in [Tables 1](#) and [2](#) show the general trend of language use in Togo. Even though these examples have been selected *ad hoc* or in order to show particular cases, they illustrate what we read and hear in everyday usage in Togo. Coupled with the fact that French is a morphological gender-marking language, the data presented reflect how language preserves, and thus is conservative of old norms. These repetitive uses reflect traditional or old norms. These expressions are so entrenched that there is a general lack of speed in picking up new gender-neutral forms which reflect contemporary English language reforms. The English language reforms concerning the US legislation on adopting non-sexist language (see [Section 1.3](#)), are taught in English classrooms. However, even up to Master's degree level, students still repeat the old generic expressions such as *he, his, -man*. Perhaps it is possible to say that these students are not yet fully aware of the problems caused by sexist use of language. However, one way to help them is by bringing

Table 2: Gender-bias in legal language

| No. | Expression | Source |
|-----|---|----------------------------|
| 1. | Le nouveau Code des personnes et de la famille a pour objectif avoué de réduire les discriminations surtout celles qui sont faites aux femmes et de réaliser une harmonisation entre les lois nationales et les instruments internationaux de protection des droit humains . | RTSJ, 2012:2 (by a female) |
| 2. | Saluons ici les avancées faites part le code dans la reconnaissance des droits de la femme ... | Same as above |
| 3. | Le comité des Droits de l'Homme en sa 101 ^{ème} session ... | Same as above |
| 4. | La nature de la société internationale tournée vers les seuls intérêts des Etats, rendait ainsi difficile la proclamation des droits et libertés au profit de l'individu . | RTSJ, p. 22. |
| 5. | Le droit international fait dès lors son entrée dans les droits de l'homme par la grande porte ... | Same as above |
| 6. | ... le droit international veut saisir les droits de l'homme . | Same as above |
| 7. | ... la Déclaration Universelle des droits de l'homme , adoptée par l'Assemblée générale de l'Organisation des Nations Unies le 10 décembre 1948. Elle sera complétée par les deux Pactes en 1966. | RTSJ, p. 23. |
| 8. | La déclaration répond bien à cet idéal de protéger tout l'homme et protéger les droits de tous les hommes . | Same as above |
| 9. | De même la Déclaration et le Programme d'action de Vienne, adoptés par la Conférence mondiale sur les droits de l'homme le 25 juin 1993 en Autriche consacrent l'idée que la Déclaration universelle des droits de l'homme constitue un modèle commun à suivre pour tous les peuples et toutes les nations. | Same as above |
| 10. | Au Togo, l'obligation de loyalisme envers l'Etat, est affirmée par la Constitution de 1992 qui dispose : « tout citoyen a le devoir sacré de respecter la Constitution ainsi que les lois et règlements de la République » (art. 42) | RTSJ, p. 92 |

awareness to the problem, as it is being done in a small way in the current paper.

Research teaches us that sexist language and patterns make women invisible, trivialized, dependent, stereotyped, to mention but these consequences. In the classrooms, these conserved sexist patterns may be the reasons why male participation in classroom discussions still prevails over female participation in Togo. Generally, in Togo when female students need to talk, they still look around to see if a male student is ready to talk first. The females' reaction shows a feeling of being hierarchically inferior and thus a male must open the floor. I have observed this as a teacher often and it takes several motivating statements to get a few females to react and to participate. When they eventually do, they are quite excellent. The problem is that there is no written institutional structure, such as official rules and regulations, that

enforces the encouragement of female students to participate in the classrooms. What I am suggesting here is that there must be formal institutional regulations or written rules empowering all instructors to use more conscientious means to encourage, particularly, female students in Togo to get out of their 'mutism' and to participate in classrooms. Currently, only instructors aware of the problem show particular encouragement to females to express themselves in class.

Again, we know from psycholinguistic research that our mental dictionaries store information which we retrieve when it is needed (Sandra 1990; Reeves, Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff 1998). This is reinforced by the French words 'la répétition est pédagogique'. Therefore, if lawmakers and people in the law (e.g., the case that motivated this article) keep using the old forms (when they are the ones the general public listens to for legal

guidance), then their archaic examples programmed in the mental dictionaries will continue to reflect the state of the language as sexist.

It is important to stress that language counts hugely in bringing about change. Therefore, suggestions can be made in order to achieve change. Consequently, when we look back at the tentative examples of good uses in Table 2 (examples 1–2), these show that the French language has a large enough lexicon to allow the formulation of non-sexist language and to specify male terms only when this is needed. Thus, when a law professional reads in a traditional text ‘droit de l’homme’ and he or she intends to make a difference (whether orally in speech or in a written form), the insertion of ‘... et de la femme’ does not blur the meaning but concretizes the presence and involvement of women. Again, in referring to the traditional texts, we intellectuals should reformulate them by adopting contemporary norms.

English language reforms are good or rational examples to imitate. Therefore, French users and francophones can replace old texts and databases with French equivalent expressions that are non-sexist. They can additionally give their consent in decisions and in their speech habits to make a difference in practicing new expressions in which women are added. A few examples are as follows:

- i *droit de l’homme* becomes *droit de l’homme et de la femme; droit des personnes*
- ii *protéger l’homme et protéger les droits de tous les hommes* becomes *protéger les personnes* or *l’homme et la femme ... and tous les hommes et femmes*
- iii *tout citoyen a le devoir sacré de respecter la Constitution* becomes *tout citoyen et toute citoyenne*
- iv *un individu* becomes *a neutral plural form: des individus, des êtres humains, des personnes*

English language use in classrooms and elsewhere will be influenced positively to exclude sexist language if the French language use in Togo can audaciously take the path of change. The change can start with novel oral renditions of the old traditional

texts. This means that trained and intellectual bodies must be eclectic enough to adjust to changes and be real intellectuals pushing to make a difference.

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