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Gender and Language in Sub-Saharan African Contexts: Issues and Challenges

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Abstract

In this first paper, we examine a range of issues associated with the study of gender and language in sub-Saharan African contexts. These include whether (and in what sense) such contexts may constitute a 'special case', the relevance of feminism, and what might be encompassed by 'context', 'African contexts' and 'African topics'. While a substantial amount of what we write is relevant to Applied Linguistics in Africa more broadly (see Makoni and Meinhof 2004, for a discussion), we argue that there are also specific gender issues which are of interest and importance to language and gender study specifically, and indeed that it is possible to see some of these issues as 'characteristic' of African contexts. It will be evident from this first paper, and the others, that along with taking on board the commonalities in terms of the theoretical notions used in our field in African and non-African contexts, there is also a need to recognise a range of situated understandings of gender and feminism.

Keywords: gender, context, Africa, discourse, feminism

Introduction

It is something of an embarrassing commonplace to say that empirical studies of language and gender have to date been carried out largely in parts of the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Europe. While this situation is changing, published sociolinguistic and discourse analytical work on gender and language in relation to African contexts remains scarce (but see our Bibliography, this issue) or infrequently achieves international circulation. Such work also tends to be concentrated within particular regions of Africa; for example, in sub-Saharan Africa, South Africa differs from other countries in the extent and reach of its empirical research on gender and language), as well as in terms of availability of research resources. Most African universities, however, often lack resources to support research, and many African academics cannot apply to national or regional Research Funding Councils, as can their counterparts in the 'West'. Another reason may be that, as most African scholars do not have English as an L1, they (like others for whom English is not a first language) often find themselves on the periphery of internationally established academic enterprise, where, inter alia, publication and other activities are conducted overwhelmingly in British/ American English (see Flowerdew 2007 for a good discussion). African work written in English is useful for the international academic community; however, many would argue that it also needs to be complemented by research and publication in local languages in Africa, together with positive recognition of this. But of more concern is the well-documented dominance of 'Western' scholarship in African Studies (see Prah, 1998; Mama, 2007), that is, the fact that 'much of our systematic knowledge of African

societies is derived from and continues to be produced by western sources' (Makoni and Meinhof, 2004: 77). Amina Mama, Professor of Gender Studies at the University of Cape Town, singles out gender studies here, noting that despite "efforts to track down and produce locally based research [in this field], the largest number of books and journal articles are written by North Americans, followed by Western Europeans (Mama, 1996; Lewis, 2003), and all this despite the strong anti-imperialist voice within feminism" (2007: 4-5). In addition, even in instances where research is produced locally, it is derived or informed largely by Western logic/ theory (see below).

One reason for more research in this area (including a special journal issue such as this), then, is to ensure the work of African scholars on gender and language topics rooted in or related to sub-Saharan Africa gathers momentum in its own right (towards developing local theories and understandings) and reaches the international community (towards enabling international engagement). This is not only for the sake of these scholars, but for the development of the gender and language field as a whole, which needs to learn from as great a diversity of contexts as possible – in terms of new data, new understandings of gender, different gender and language research priorities, and different manifestations of gender (roles, relations, identities, representations) in different contexts and Communities of practice (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992, 1999). It is one objective of this special issue to tease out the diversity of gendered and other discourses that characterise sub-Saharan Africa and its many, diverse and changing cultures and contexts.

This diversity can also be seen in the range of research foci available for a gender and language analyst in sub-Saharan Africa. Of course, as sub-Saharan Africa is so rich in language and dialects, the workings of grammatical gender can be explored in each of these 'codes', and has been in many (e.g. Mutaka and Tamanji, 2003; Katamba, 2006), and gender and language study would be foolish to ignore the *descriptive* dimension of this. A given 'code' may have clear gender implications (see, for example, Corbett and Mtenje, 1987; Cole 1955/90, Rapoo 2002). It is always worth looking at the linguistic resources available in a given language, for instance, overlexicalisation and lexical omissions. In IsiZulu (for example), spoken mainly in the Kwazulu Natal province of South Africa, but also in many metropolitan South African cities, whereas sexually active boys may be called *amasoka* ('men highly favoured by girls'), sexually-active girls are referred to derogatorily (and in multiple possible ways) as *isindindwa* (a woman with multiple sexual partners; an extremely derogatory label)*; isifebe* (loose woman, a near synonym of *isindindwa*)*; unoyile* (rich person, a sarcastic reference to a woman who has multiple sexual partners) and/or *isikhebeleshe* (useless woman/person)[1]. And in several African languages, for example Kinyarwanda of Rwanda, and Setswana and Ikalanga of Botswana, it is grammatically impossible for a woman to say, as did Jane Eyre of Mr Rochester, 'Reader, I married him', since the verb *marry* cannot take a feminine subject (Kimenyi, 1992; Ellece, 2007).

However, explicitly applied sociolinguistic and discourse analytical study of language and gender in sub-Saharan African contexts is also important in order to explore actual language in use, in a range of contexts (see below). More specifically, it is instructive to see how aspects of linguistic code such as the above are *used*: are these apparent constraints circumvented in some way, for example, and can we see language change and in possible response to what? The 'code/use' distinction (comparable to de Saussure's

langue and *parole*) can also be exemplified in proverbs: African languages are rich in proverbs about gender (see e.g. Schipper, 2003), and therefore constitute a linguistic resource, but how they are used (e.g. in what context, for what purpose, by whom), and whether they are contested or used subversively, is another thing entirely. But while there is considerable work on African sociolinguistics (e.g. Djite, 2008; Mesthrie, 2010), there is a lack of African sociolinguistic work in relation to gender[2]. This may be related to the paucity of African women in Sub-Saharan African institutions of higher education: "6% of the professoriate, with most women in junior ranks or in administrative positions" (Mama, 2007: 4).

Sub-Saharan Africa: is it special?

Every continent is 'special' in some way, and at the same time anything that happens in one continent has 'echoes' outside it. Something ('X') may be characteristic of a given sub-Saharan African context, but this is not for ever/all the time, and is not likely to be a defining feature relevant to all its members. So, how do we (even: can we), instead, 'characterise' sub-Saharan African contexts? Possibilities include: cultures of orality, multi-lingualism/multi-ethnicity, respect for the elderly, the importance of religion, strong family networks, often salient gender differentiation, stark gaps between rich and poor, and sharp juxtapositions of the traditional and the modern – relative to some parts of the 'Western' world. These characteristics have implications for topics, research questions and data when it comes to the study of language and gender. But the above list reads somewhat apolitically and ahistorically, and must be supplemented by characteristics of relatively recent colonialism, post-colonialism, pan-Africanism, and on-going regional conflict. In relation to these, Amina Mama suggests that African 'intellectual ethics' (i.e. which include the liberatory imperative of the African academy): "are not necessarily universal because they are so profoundly shaped by the regional and historical context and struggles" (2007: 22).

So, sub-Saharan African contexts may (currently) be rather specially characterised, which has implications for all social research, including work on language and gender. Nevertheless, it remains important to ask whether a focus on (Sub-Saharan) Africa as a continent or part of a continent is not a form of post-colonial marginalisation (why not position it as part of and/or integrate it firmly into the mainstream of 'gender and language study proper'?) rather than a dissemination of African perspectives and experiences.

Our response is as follows. On the one hand, 'classic' gender and language topics (e.g. the media, institutions (courts, workplaces, classrooms), advertisements, private talk), sexist language and language change, are as relevant to different parts of Africa – and can and should be explored in Africa – as anywhere else. Further, it can be argued that the various theoretical deficit/dominance/difference/discourse approaches to the field (for an overview see, for example, Litosseliti, 2006; Talbot, 1998) are no less relevant to African contexts than elsewhere (though see also below). Certainly it would seem fruitless – politically as well as intellectually – to reinvent the field for a particular continent or region[3].

At the same time, we must consider that modern 'Western' gender and language study was galvanised in the early 1970s by the advent of the Women's Movement, and has been informed by 'Western' feminist preoccupations and approaches; in addition, that 'Western' feminism (or at least interpretations of it) is unpalatable in many African contexts (see below). To what extent can a 'Western'-feminism-informed gender and language study therefore underlie the study of gender and language in sub-Saharan African contexts?

We write as a team of African and European scholars who are aware of the importance of both considerations. We agree with Makoni and Meinhof (2007), who propose, in relation to developing applied linguistics more generally in Africa, that we need to be both 'critical of western perspectives' *and* 'sceptical of the validity of ethnicising epistemologies … as an intellectually viable way of reacting to the 'dominance' of such western perspectives' (2007: 78). Perhaps a special issue such as this is best seen as a small step towards reorienting focus on Sub-Saharan Africa, from a centre position, where it both reflects in some ways and informs in some ways what are/ become dominant approaches in the language and gender field.

Gender activism, feminism and 'African feminism'

Sub-Saharan Africa has plenty of examples of gender activism. Certain groups of women and men have taken it upon themselves to challenge oppressive conservative practices (e.g. the Association for the Fight against Gender-based Violence, and the Association of Female Jurists, both in Cameroon). In Southern Africa more widely, many vocal groups, both within and outside women's organisations, have successfully lobbied for gender-inclusive policies and laws (e.g. Emang Bsadi (Stand Up Women) and the Women's Coalition in Botswana). In South Africa there are numerous women's rights organisations, such as the Office on the Status of Women, which aims to promote the National Women's Empowerment Policy, ensure the integration of gender into policies, and act as a catalyst for affirmative action. And whilst examples such as the ones above focus on the impact of feminism and activism primarily on the lives of women, there is also a significant impact on the lives of men and a recognition of the relevance of feminism for men (pro-feminism). At the regional level, many of the South African Development Community (SADC) members have signed the Draft SADC Protocol on Gender and Development (2008), one of whose objectives is to 'achieve gender equality and equity through the development and implementation of gender-responsive legislation, policies, programmes and projects'. Notably, some issues, such as female circumcision (which still stands at about 20% in Cameroon, for example), sexual practices in the time of AIDS and HIV, and polygamy, are more relevant to these programmes than to their equivalents in 'Western' countries.

There have been different influences here: International Women's Day celebrations, national liberation movements (e.g. in Eritrea in the 1990s), the Fourth World Conference of Women in Beijing (1995), progressive actions and discourses of aid agencies (e.g. PLAN International (Cameroon) and men's movements, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the Commonwealth of Nations). 'Western' feminism has had a direct or indirect influence on most of the above. No cultural grouping is 'immune'

from globalisation, which has brought together different people(s), and a mix of cultural practices, ideas and discourses. For example – though on a rather different level – Sunderland (this volume) illustrates how traces of (non-feminist) 'Western' discourses can make their way intertextually into 'tiny texts' in an urban African restaurant.

Many African women and men have indeed had *direct* access to 'Western' feminist discourses, perhaps most obviously those who have spent time as members of the African diaspora in the 'West', perhaps through postgraduate study in Europe or North America (or who have lived in these countries as a 'spouse'). These Africans are likely to have been exposed to 'Western' discourses of gender equality – for example, that there is a distinction between biological sex and social gender, that there is no natural gender division of labour (housework and paid work) and that it is important to fight for improved working conditions both outside and inside the home.

Yet 'Western' feminist thinking (or at least perceptions of it) *as such* is rejected by many African women (and men) and women's groups in the light of some (traditional) values, e.g. the importance of family and children, which African women largely hold dear (see especially Rushing, 1996) - for very good reason, in contexts where there is little state support. Here, 'feminism' may seem to fly in the face of post-colonial, (Pan)African 'Nationalism'. Many African women (and men) also remain distinctly pro-heterosexual (if not homophobic, sometimes citing religious reasons) and pro-natal. The focus on feeding their families (i.e. meeting traditional expectations of wives and mothers) tends to have primacy for women over the politics of male/female relations (Rushing, 1996; Steady, 1996; see also Mikell, 1997, on the valuing of tradition). Although they may, as shown above, at the same time fight for equal opportunities and access to health, economic and educational resources and decision-making positions in both private and public domains, many African women in particular (like many non-African women) resist strongly calling themselves *feminists*, perhaps seeing feminism as anti-men, anti-child, and disruptive of the 'natural' state of the family. Popular interpretation of the concept of feminism in Cameroon and Botswana, for example, refers to actions by women negatively directed against men, to challenge the 'legitimacy' of male dominance (and tend to ignore the relevance of feminism for men). Yet, on the academic front at least, this rejection of 'feminism' (on the intellectual grounds of Nationalism and Pan-Africanism) has been seen as misguided. Amina Mama for example writes:

> In resisting the insights of … feminist epistemological interventions, African scholarship has remained poorly equipped to address the challenges posed by gender, class, ethnic and other divisions that characterise social reality in Africa as much as anywhere else. In this respect African scholarship confounds its own ethical agenda and limits its contribution to the emergence of a more liberated and just social order (2007: 7).

Some African women we know (and to a lesser extent, men) describe themselves as having been influenced by 'Western' feminism, yet remaining conscious of 'positive African' values. Such 'African feminists' are largely aware of the perceived 'radicalism' of 'Western' feminism and see a need to balance their drive to advance the causes of women without upsetting many values cherished by their own people, and indeed their politicians, who may see – or represent – their actions as the result of 'outsider impositions' (Mikell, 1997; see also Atanga, 2007). Indeed, *most* educated women

(feminist or otherwise) face the dilemma of acting as 'model' African ('model' Motswana, 'model' Zambian, etc.) women, respecting at least some traditional expectations of women, while at the same time challenging conservative practices and actively participating in hitherto male-dominated arenas, including political ones. An important distinction has been made between the 'feminisms' of African women intellectuals, who may debate the above points, and of those relatively uneducated women who may nevertheless run small businesses with autonomy, independently and effectively, perhaps as well as heading and running a family in the absence of a husband (see Toure et al., 2003). Arguably, the same distinction may apply to men in Africa.

One of the strongest academic criticisms against 'Western' feminism is that its application to African contexts does not take into account some of the unique gender relations in many parts of the African continent, in particular those which show matrilineal tendencies (see e.g. Amadiume, 1987; Arnfred, 2004) or positively affirm women's sexuality (see e.g. Nzegwu, 2006). In traditionally matrilineal cultures, women are not at the receiving end of unequal power relations in any straightforward way. Another example, shown in Ifi Amadiume's *Male Daughters and Female Husbands* (1987), is the traditional phenomenon among the Nnobi people (Igbo) in Nigeria of (heterosexual) women marrying other women in order for them to have access to land and other resources, including powerful political positions. Because the 'husband' women could not have children with their wives, such women had men sire children for them, but those men then had no claim over the children. If women in such traditional cultures had this sort of power, then a version of 'second wave' feminism that sees men as (almost) always dominant, as in patriarchy, cannot be appropriate for those contexts. Few 'Western' feminists would now see or represent men as the all-powerful oppressor (not to mention the pro-feminism of some men's movements), but this may have been the impression sometimes conveyed in the feminist literature and/or media spin of previous decades. However, we would argue that, while remaining alert to the diversity of gendered practices and understandings in African contexts, language and gender scholars should not be nervous of trying to expose *different* forms of oppression (a matrilineal society does not preclude other forms of male dominance, neither does women marrying other women), and the relationship between these forms of oppression and language. Indeed a woman who marries another may wield similar 'masculine' power to that associated with men. The sex of the husband may change, but the oppressive social (gender) relations may persist.

Further, any notion of a 'feminist' critique in the context of African countries has to take into account that, socially and politically, challenges for many African women in particular are immense and numerous, gender being only one. Many African women are confronted with poverty which stems from the burden of caring for and feeding a family (often, today, without the economic assistance of a husband), against a socio-cultural background where women are largely, in any case, responsible for the upbringing of the children with little support from men. There tend to be unequal job opportunities in what are traditionally male-dominated societies and, additionally, women often lack access to land (due to traditional inheritance laws), which has its own economic impact (Goheen, 1996). Because African societies tend to be essentially agrarian, poor access to farm land then becomes a primary cause of poverty. Family poverty may also lead to gender-based violence if, for example, a wife supplements the family income by working outside the

home and the man's traditional status as breadwinner is threatened (see Fonchingong, 2005; Fondo, 2006).

In the absence of state-provided health care, poverty often leads to poor health. In many countries, especially in Southern Africa, women are also the hardest hit when it comes to HIV infection. In Botswana females are twice as likely to become infected by HIV as males[4]. They also bear most of the burden of HIV/AIDS patient care when they themselves are ill (Lindsey, Hirschfeld and Tlou, 2003). Lack of health care further contributes to unacceptably high rates of maternal and child mortality (many causes of which are arguably now receiving a disproportionately small amount of attention, given the global focus on HIV-reduction). In terms of education, girl children tend to have lower attendance rates and stay at school for fewer years than boys. Where primary education is limited or not compulsory, or expensive, many families will prioritise the education of sons, especially if housework and childcare need extra hands, given that such tasks are largely seen as the responsibility of women and girls. Literacy rates for women and girls in most regions of Africa, especially rural regions and the Muslim regions of Sub-Saharan Africa, are typically lower than those of men (e.g. 21.6% compared to 45% for males in Benin, 12.5% compared to 40% for males in Chad – see Demographic and Health Surveys 2003-2006[5]). Context of course is all important, as there are exceptions to this state of affairs (e.g. slightly lower literacy rates for males in Lesotho (Demographic and Health Surveys 2003-2006) and in Botswana (Gender Info – United Nations Statistics Division 2007); the latter perhaps explained by Botswana's policy of free access to primary education). However, in rural areas especially, an 'over-educated' young woman tends to be seen as a liability, potential embarrassment and indeed a threat to her future husband and in-laws; hence, young women tend to (be encouraged to) marry at relatively early ages, often without completing high school (if indeed they have got that far). Many new wives then soon become mothers (see Bakare-Yusuf, 2003), of many children, due to societal and often family pressures.

For many gender and/or (pro)feminist projects in (sub-Saharan) African contexts, issues of sexuality are also important, related as sexuality is to gender roles, identities, attitudes and practices: as Spronk (2009: 502) puts it, 'the social organisation of sexuality, through rituals such as marriage and circumcision, is based on conventional gender and sex roles'. Again, it is important to be extremely cautious of developing interpretations of such issues that are not situated within/emerging from those very contexts. Various scholars (e.g. Spronk, 2009, Undie and Benaya, 2006, Jolly, 2003) alert us to the fact that conventional sexuality research in sub-Saharan Africa has been conducted in a self-evident, ahistorical and generalising manner, focusing on sexuality as a problem, typically within a health and development framework (e.g. in relation to the HIV/AIDS crisis or to reproduction issues). This has led to a neglect of important conceptual issues, such as the racialisation of sex, normative notions of masculinity and femininity, transmarital relationships, the plurality of accounts of female circumcision, and the marginalisation (even criminalisation) of alternative sexualities. Indeed, sexuality (extending to issues of prostitution and marital rape) is a particularly sensitive topic here.

Researchers in the field should, we argue, address the sheer complexity of and contradictions surrounding such issues, especially in an era of globalisation. For example, Renne (2002) explores both the common ground and the conflict between women and

men, and between the young people's desire for a 'modern' identity and their elders' more traditional models of sexuality. Globalisation also impacts on sexuality – see Altman, 1999 – in economic ways (sexuality being increasingly commodified), in cultural ways ('modern' behaviours or identities conflicting with traditional mores, patriarchal controls, or notions of 'Africanness'; see also Luyt, this volume), and in political ways (different political regimes treat alternative sexualities differently). Spronk's (2009) excellent analysis of young professionals in Nairobi aptly illustrates the diversity and complexity of this group's preoccupation with matters of gender and sexuality, as well as how the notion 'African' becomes 'a polemical tool in debates about cultural authenticity' (p. 509). Her female interviewees articulated the tensions in trying to balance conventional understandings of 'African' womanhood (e.g. married motherhood) with professional and 'modern African' womanhood (e.g. autonomy), and rejecting 'Westernisation' while advocating 'Africanness' (p. 510). In Spronk's words, this particular group's difficulty is that while they are critical of 'Westernisation', 'they are also part of global cosmopolitan processes that are often interpreted as Westernisation' and which 'are also interpreted as causing erosion of tradition' [while] 'true Africans' are seen as upholding tradition' (p. 511; see also Luyt, this volume). Given that tradition is also sometimes boosted as a rejection of colonialist practices, much of what is seen as problematic in 'Western' feminism is not seen as problematic, discriminatory or repressive by many African men or women. Sexuality, and the language of sexuality, is a key component in precisely these kinds of debates in many African contexts.

Because of these complexities, some African gender activists and researchers tend therefore to describe themselves not as *feminists* but as *African feminists* to emphasise the positive African values they want to maintain. Steady (1996) suggests that the defining characteristic of African feminism (by no means a consistent or homogeneous category – see below) is that it emphasises nature over culture, female autonomy and cooperation, as well as mothering, kinship and self reliance (among other values). This can be of course problematic, on the grounds that any emphasis on *nature* can be seen as positioning women (and men) 'essentially' as body rather than mind or rationality, and as incapable of influencing their societies in any conceptual or intellectual way (see below for more discussion of the contested nature of African feminism). The notion of *African feminism* has still not been well theorised (although there is a journal with the title *Feminist Africa*, founded in 2002), and questions such as "Does it make sense to talk about African feminism in some sense?" and "If yes, what are its different concerns and strands and what is their relationship to Western feminist concerns?" necessarily arise.

The notion of 'African feminism(s)' remains contested. Akatsa-Bukachi (2005), for example, questions if there is any discernible feminist school of thought that is actively *African* (a question similar to that we ask of our own 'language and gender' project). It can be argued that *African feminism* in a very broad sense cannot be distinguished from *feminism* (understood here as 'Western feminism') in that many problems faced by women in Africa are faced by women (and men) all over the world[6] (though see above) – something with which we would broadly agree, although the actual *emphases* on and inflections of different concerns vary hugely with context. Other reasons put forth against the notion of 'African feminism' include that Africa cannot be treated as a single homogeneous entity (for example, women and men from the Maghrebian countries of

Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Morocco tend to face different challenges from women and men south of the Sahara). Certainly this diversity must be acknowledged, but 'African feminism' does not and should not entail a monolithic view of the continent, neither does it essentialise African women/men, suggesting that all face the same problems[7]. Clearly, they do not. This is precisely the same problem with the use of any name of a social/political grouping which includes the word *women* (e.g. 'the Women's Movement') – but this does not mean that there is no strategic or political value in such terms.

In terms of problems faced on a theoretical/epistemological level, two of us (Lilian Atanga, Sibonile Ellece), both professed 'African feminist' linguists, have had difficulties in our Africa-based research because of theoretical considerations, which have impacted our choice and wording of our research questions, data analysis and, in particular, interpretation. Notions such as *post-feminism* and even *third-wave feminism* (see e.g. Lazar, 2005; Mills, 2004), and arguments against *patriarchy* (e.g. Walsh, 2001), salient to much 'western' feminism, seem less so (or at least seem inappropriate or insufficient) within 'feminist' gender and language studies in sub-Saharan African contexts, given that many such contexts are not only extremely patriarchal (in the sense that they are male-dominated), but that the dominant versions of masculinity in these contexts bring with them particularly disempowering roles for women (and indeed some men, not least gay men – see, for instance, Epprecht, 1998). Further, in many such contexts, there is little evidence of even *moments* of power for women (see e.g. Baxter, 2003). There is, then, an argument that in many African contexts it may well at times be important to look in a binary way at 'gender differences', for example, through an interpretive lens of '(male) dominance' in language use (outdated as this may be in many 'western' academic and social contexts), if the aim and outcome is the identification and challenging of different manifestations and workings of women's disadvantage in and through discursive and other social practices (see Atanga, 2007).

Makoni and Meinhof (2007), looking at the sociolinguistics of language use in Africa, provide a good example of a similar mismatch between 'Western' and 'Africanist' perspectives in another field:

> While the endangerment of 'indigenous' languages may be read as potentially catastrophic by some linguists, from an Africanist perspective, the spread of the urban vernaculars reflects the extent to which African speakers are creatively adapting to new urban contexts. This underscores the importance of sociolinguistic frameworks which would be able to capture the nuances of the local contexts.
>
> (Makoni and Meinhof, 2007: 83)

An awareness of the need for such frameworks is equally important for the project we are engaged in here.

African 'contexts', African 'topics'?

In the course of the 'Gender and language in African contexts' project, we have had to grapple first with the self-evident fact that 'African contexts' are many and diverse, and that 'context' exists on many levels. The geographical notion of *context* requires us to consider not only the continent as a whole, and sub-Saharan African *vis-à-vis* the Maghreb (for example), but also individual countries, regions, ethnic groupings (many of which cross national boundaries), cities, towns, villages, settlements, settings (such as courts and markets), Communities of practice such as family compounds, families and football teams, and indeed African diasporic contexts across the globe. With any phenomenon characteristic of any of these contexts, it is important to identify links with other contexts – including 'non-African' ones, in which there may well be echoes, faint or otherwise, of given African contexts. (Note that we continue to refer to 'characteristics' rather than 'defining features'.) Again, it is important not to essentialise a given geographical context – not only will there be diversity within that context, it will always be in a continual state of flux.

Yet the notion of 'context' itself is more complex than this, extending well beyond geography and space. In discussions of the discourse-historical approach to CDA, for example, Ruth Wodak (2008, 2009) identifies a range of contextual features potentially relevant to any occurrence of language use, including the broad socio-political context, the historical context, the narrow social context associated with the language users in question, contextual considerations of genre and topic, intertextual links, and the immediate co-text of the language in question (which may include visuals). Any proper exploration of language and discourse needs to take these different levels and dimensions on board.

We hope we have plausibly shown that it is intellectually interesting and fruitful to ask what may be 'characteristic' of different sub-Saharan African contexts in terms of language and gender. Certainly the brainstorm sessions we have run at the various seminars of the 'Gender and Language in African Contexts' project (in Leeds (UK), Gaborone (Botswana), London (UK) and Dschang (Cameroon) have produced various *topics*, and our (2010) three-day Conference at Obafemi-Awolowo University in Ile-Ife, Nigeria, saw several of these being debated.

Topics which can provisionally be seen as more characteristic of particular sub-Saharan African than other contexts, or as having a particularly sub-Saharan African salience, include those related to traditional practices such as the representation of women and men in 'orature' sites including songs, myths, folklore and proverbs; and the construction of masculinity and femininity in traditional ceremonies (e.g. pre-wedding advice ceremonies, birth celebrations). They also include more 'modern' topics such as taboo words, euphemisms and 'hlonipha' (a Bantu 'language of respect', highly gendered), all resources for language use, and textual/visual representation/construction of masculinity and femininity in HIV/AIDS-prevention public awareness posters and brochures. Further modern topics characteristic of sub-Saharan African contexts which may yield interesting, new data include naming practices and professional titles, gendered literacies, discourses around sexuality and heteronormativity, and the representation/construction of masculinity and femininity in a variety of media as diverse as beer ads and news reports of leadership elections. For Stylistics, in addition to the language of folklore, topics include representations of gender in novels/plays by African writers, and of African

women, men and gender relations by non-African writers. Traditional and modern or alternative discourses on gender may in fact be rather specifically competing in many sub-Saharan African contexts (as in many non-African contexts): for example, the progressive discourses on gender coming from the Beijing Conference and the UN Millennium Declaration, and the discourses underlying many traditional social practices.

While some of the above issues may be very broadly 'pan-African' (although varying in salience), others may be much more context-specific. Importantly, these issues are not *exclusive* to sub-Saharan Africa – as suggested above, many will be echoed or even paralleled outside (and not only in the African diaspora). For example: pre-wedding advice is as much a characteristic of the practices of the Anglican Church in the UK, as it is of Botswana traditional marriage ceremonies of 'Go laya' (the Advice ceremony) (Ellece, 2007; Schapera, 1940/71). Identifying such topics and characteristics is not to essentialise these in terms of a false 'stability': as everywhere, African contexts are changing (many very fast), in our increasingly globalised world. It *is* to say that certain language and gender related issues may, for now, be more salient in, or closely associated with some African contexts than most non-African contexts.

The 'for now' is important. Ultimately, there may be no need for such a project. Now, we suggest, there is – not only to give data from 'African' epistemological sites a wider airing, but also because current language and gender scholarship badly needs insights, understandings and findings from this currently intellectually under-represented continent. Such a project will both require and benefit from a range of different strategies, in addition to themed seminars, conferences, and publications. Strategies which Makoni and Meinhof (2007) suggest to consolidate applied linguistics in Africa include 'the formation of more national and regional associations in Africa'; the 'strengthening of already existing academic networks through the exchange of external examiners and shared doctoral supervision'; 'more intellectual exchanges … within Africa'; and the production of academic materials and syllabi 'with an African focus' (2007: 95-96). All are relevant to promoting the study of language and gender in (sub-Saharan) African contexts. As noted at the start of this paper, however, these proposals face a number of serious challenges, in addition to the severe lack of financial and material resources within African countries: the dominance of 'western' sources, research paradigms, and refereed academic journals (most of which emphasise the importance of publication in English); further, African universities themselves may (it has been claimed) perpetuate an academic dependency on 'the West' (Mazrui, 2000). We welcome Makoni and Meinhof's proposed strategies and acknowledge the challenges, and have replaced the words 'applied linguistics' in the extract below with 'gender and language research'. Makoni and Meinhof urge linguists to:

> bridge the gap between the contexts in which some of the [gender and language research] ideas are generated and the contexts in which they are subsequently applied in Africa […] because the theoretical ideas which underpin our work in Africa are not typically produced with Africa in mind. This is not to say that ideas generated elsewhere are not relevant to [gender and language research] in Africa but that their relevance has to be demonstrated rather than assumed. [Gender and language research] in Africa

> has to constantly distinguish between that which is globally current and that which is locally relevant.
>
> (Makoni and Meinhof, 2007: 95)

We have no wish to marginalise African contexts within gender and language study, and would claim that the theoretical notions utilised and developed by our field are indeed as relevant to parts of Africa as to anywhere else. But there may also be a need for utilisation of a variety of interpretive frameworks and for recognition of different evaluations – for example, of gender, feminism, of a gendered division of labour – contingent, as always, on context.

This volume

This special issue of *Gender and Language* includes four further papers exploring gender and language in sub-Saharan African contexts.

Lilian Atanga, in her paper "The Discursive Construction of a 'Model Cameroonian Woman' within the Cameroonian Parliament", takes a critical discourse analytical approach to examine the gendered discourses and discursive strategies used in parliamentary sessions in Cameroon. Her examples show that although constructions of a 'model' or 'ideal' woman in that particular context mostly rely on arguments about 'culture', 'morality' and 'geographical differentiation' to legitimise and sustain traditional femininity (e.g. women as wives, carers, in domestic roles), they are also challenged by some ministers and female MPs who argue against some male practices and the idea of the 'silent' woman. Atanga argues that the co-existence of tradition and contestation in the Cameroonian parliament is an indication of the changing roles of women, as part of a changing globalised world.

In his paper, "*Constructing Hegemonic Masculinities in South Africa: The Discourse and Rhetoric of Heteronormativity*", **Russell Luyt** examines the construction of gender identities in South African (Afrikaans, English and Xhosa) men's interaction, particularly focusing on the discursive/ rhetorical (re)production of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity. The analysis of discourses of regional and local hegemonic masculinities, together with analysis of norm-referencing rhetorical devices (such as normative preservation, reform, (re)production and revolution), highlights the extent to which practices of both compliance and resistance *contribute* toward the (re)production of masculinities; the complex, strategic, contradictory and diverse ways in which identities are (re)constituted in talk using available discursive resources; and the role of ethnic and social group membership as well as broader sociocultural context in identity work.

Sibonile Ellece's paper "*The 'placenta' of the nation: Motherhood discourses in Tswana marriage ceremonies*" draws data from Tswana marriage ceremonies in Botswana, and particularly the *Patlo* ritual of marriage negotiations, to illustrate the ways in which motherhood is constructed as a compulsory and indispensable aspect of feminine identity. Constructions of motherhood are observed at the micro-level (through content analysis of narratives of motherhood, lexical choices in the 'Rutu' chant, and the use of 'baby'

language) as well as through the re-contextualization of the discourses articulated in the marriage ceremony by the interviewees. Ellece makes the point that while motherhood in Botswana may be largely viewed as fulfilling and a cause for celebration for women, it is nevertheless also constructed in her data as something one cannot opt out of. In addition, it is women in this context who are under pressure to produce children, and who experience the stigma of infertility, in ways that men are not expected to. Societal expectations on motherhood override individual choices and plans concerning the same.

Finally, in her paper "'*Brown Sugar': the textual construction of femininity in two 'tiny texts*'", **Jane Sunderland** offers a critical reading of the ways two 'tiny texts' on brown and white sugar cubes, both featuring women, advertise the café in urban Botswana in which they are found. She argues that these texts construct gender in a very particular way. Sunderland focuses on how lexical and other intertextual links of *sugar* and *sweetness* used in relation to women may index women as 'available commodities' in ways which are inflected with ethnicity, and points to the role of globalisation here.

We hope that these four papers will demonstrate to readers of *Gender and Language* something of the spectrum of issues associated with the gender and language field in sub-Saharan African contexts. Of course, the full spectrum is much wider, and we invite readers to consult the Working Bibliography for a richer picture, and, indeed, to use it as a resource for further work in this area. We also hope that these papers will offer readers useful examples of integrating micro and macro/ linguistic and social concerns in dealing with data from sub-Saharan Africa, and also attest to the importance of context-contingent understandings of gender and language.

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Endnotes

[1] See also http://isizulu.ukzn.ac.za (accessed Oct. 6 2011).

[2] There is also a huge amount of work on development and gender, for example the education of girls, and literacy programmes in Africa for women.

[3] We use the problematic label 'Western' here for reasons of brevity, and refer the reader to the many critical discussions of such labels and the construction of 'otherness' – most notably Said, 1978.

[4] UNDP Botswana Human Resource Report 2000. This is in part because women are more anatomically vulnerable to HIV.

[5] http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/chad_statistics.html (accessed Oct. 6 2011).

[6] This way of thinking came out of a debate on African feminism during the seminar on Gender and Language in African Contexts, City University, London, in November 2008.

[7] For a discussion of the creation of stereotypes and misconceptions of women during colonialism, which were perpetuated in various ethnological theories, see Davies (1986).