

Stereotypes and the Representation of Algerian Women through Idiomatic Expressions

Stéréotypes et représentation de la femme algérienne à travers les expressions idiomatiques

Faiza Boukhelef¹ 

Hassiba Benbouali University of Chlef/Algeria
f.boukhelef@univ-chlef.dz

Amina Babou² 

Hassiba Benbouali University of Chlef/Algeria
aminababou88@yahoo.fr

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Abstract

The current study aims at canvassing how Algerian idioms mirror the various stereotypes employed in Algeria endorsing female deficiency and male dominance. Idioms constitute the number of internalised attitudes and beliefs about gender as a social category, which are the result of the unconscious socialization and the cumulativeness of daily behaviour, at home, at school, at work, etc. This qualitative study exerts self-report observations and semi-structured interviews compiled from previous research about gender differences and negative stereotypes in Algeria. Gender stereotypes in Algerian culture are mainly channelled through language. Thus, There is a direct correlation between the way Algerians use gender nuances in their daily speech and these speakers knowledge or stereotypes of the way gender roles are disseminated. It has been yielded that Algerian women are implicitly assumed to be weak public leaders, poor interlocutors in religious and serious matters, etc. Algerian Arabic has ample evidence of the negative attitudes towards women's verbal behaviour. Idioms are powerful transmitters of folk beliefs and dominant understandings of femininity and masculinity.

Keywords: androcentricity-language- idiomatic expressions-stereotypes –women

Résumé:

Le but de cette étude est de déterminer comment les idiomes algériens reflètent les différents stéréotypes employés en Algérie soutenant la déficience féminine et la domination masculine. Les idiomes constituent le nombre d'attitudes et de croyances intériorisées sur le genre en tant que catégorie sociale, qui sont le résultat de la socialisation inconsciente et du cumul des comportements quotidiens, à la maison, à l'école, au travail, etc. Cette étude qualitative s'appuie sur des observations d'auto-reporting et des entretiens semi-structurés compilés à partir de recherches antérieures sur les différences entre les sexes et les stéréotypes négatifs en Algérie. Les stéréotypes de genre dans la culture algérienne sont principalement véhiculés par la langue. Il existe une corrélation directe entre la façon dont les Algériens utilisent les nuances de genre dans leur discours quotidien et les connaissances ou stéréotypes de ces intervenants sur la façon dont les rôles de genre sont diffusés. Il a été révélé que les femmes algériennes sont implicitement considérées comme des leaders publics faibles, des interlocuteurs pauvres dans les affaires religieuses et graves, etc. L'arabe algérien a amplement de preuves des attitudes négatives envers le comportement verbal des femmes. Les idiomes sont de puissants transmetteurs de croyances populaires et de conceptions dominantes de la féminité et de la masculinité.

Mots-clés : androcentrisme- langue- expressions idiomatiques- stéréotypes- femmes.

Introduction

“Gender and Language” is a moot and miscellaneous arena in the sphere of sociolinguistics, which has been proliferated so widely and rapidly in recent year. Language is vehicle, knowledge, and power that shapes significant representations of women through stereotypes, namely through proverbs, tales, adages, etc. The explosive growth of this field means that each successive decade gets harder to sum up. Discrepancies in language use among the two genders leave room for speculating the differences in their perception of the world around them. Over the years, empirical linguistics take the turn to rigorously tackle these differences (Lakoff, 1973; Labov, 1990). Striking cross-gender deviations in lexical and syntactic properties have been characterized, arising a burning debate as to their tacit psycholinguistic and sociological interpretations (Lakoff, 1973; Cameron et al., 1988; Bergvall, 2014). By way of contrast to the study of literal linguistic utterances, only little research exists on gender differences in figurative language (Colston and Katz (2004)). The intimate relation between gender and language needs to be grounded in real life conditioning and experiences so that it can be constructed, reconstructed and deconstructed analytically. Algerian idioms are often taken as the blood-and-guts of society inasmuch as they are crucial parts of language and popular among people. Therefore, studying gender discrimination in Algerian idioms helps us understand gender stereotypes which flicker in and out our community. According to Foucault (2005), humans build a phenomenological interpretation of our everyday existence through discourse, a construct that mediates our way of being in the world. This paper is the attempt to unveil how gendered ideology is discursively constructed, de-constructed and reconstructed in some Algerian sexist idioms. This research aims to unveil and demonstrate that there are intimate intertextual and intercultural threads between the ways idioms and proverbs reflect the roles, statuses, and identity of Algerian women.

2. Objectives of the study

This study directs a limelight on collecting, analyzing and interpreting the negative representations of women in Algerian idiomatic expressions. This study aims to disclose the different forms of discrimination against females in the Algerian society. The prominent question that can be raised in this research paper is: What are the gender and ideological representations embedded in the Algerian idiomatic expressions about gender in general and women in particular.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach in which idiomatic expressions were assembled, analysed thematically in light of their contextual meanings into negative themes which employed to relegate women to a subservient status-quo. The secondary data were extracted from a previous study which fell broadly on how male/female problems of communicating with each other arise, leaving room for embarking upon the conversational styles performed by both women and men in their communities of practice. In order to pursue the question of how women and men find difficulties in their communication, the findings of the research dismantle the ways Algerian women tend to challenge the popular stereotypes which are embedded in idiomatic expressions and how they portray them as socially and linguistically passive. Focus Group Discussions were taken as a crucial tool to obtain in-depth discussions with the samples selected. Then, secondary data were qualitatively analyzed after being transcribed and translated into the English language. The translation approach was adopted to allow for adjusting, reproducing, to re-correcting to smooth the meanings of idioms and proverbs (Newmark, 1982).

4. Defining Idioms

Researchers have always had difficulty defining what an idiom is. Although there exist miscellaneous definitions, it is sometimes impossible to differentiate between collocations, phrasal verbs and idioms. Fraser (1970) defines an idiom as a constituent or series of constituents for which the semantic interpretation is not a compositional function of the formatives of which it is composed. Idiomaticity may incorporate two discrepant meanings. In linguistic theory, an idiom can be adopted for phrases that function as single words or assembled phrases (Cacciari, 1993). Basically, it refers to the deviation from the main features of the component lexemes. Fernando (1996) considers idioms as “conventionalized multi-word expressions often, but not always non-literal” (p. 1). Grant (2003) epitomizes the scales employed by scholars (such as Alexander, 1987; Fernando, 1996) into six categories of a) semi-idioms involving at least one word related to its literal meaning, semi-opaque idioms in which meanings can be supposed with an intricate way, pseudo idioms which may incorporate lexical items which go beyond its own meaning, clear idioms, well-formed idioms, or idioms of decoding that intermingle literal and non-literal meaning, full idioms which are composed of elements whose meanings are not correlated with the idioms’ semantic interpretation, figurative idioms that have metaphorical connotations besides the usual literal interpretations. Furthermore, idiomatic expressions are comprised of a particular category of lexical items displaying a firm linguistic fabric in language use. The repertoire of any language is subjected some polylexemic expressions which submit to certain structural manipulation which is embedded in symbolism and metaphor. In Algerian culture, idioms are loaded with sexist meanings in the majority of cases. The following section will display the main theories of gender and language which are reflected in the idioms revealed in this paper.

5. Theories of Gender Inequality

This section reveals the prominent theories which direct a limelight on how cultural and popular stereotypes flicker in and out of the perception of women and men and their linguistic behaviours. By this token, ponderous evidence of the negative attitudes towards women's modes of speaking has been detected. Women are, according to that type of stereotypes, as callow as and empty-headed and they are, therefore, unsuited to wield power over men. To sharpen the idea, these popular stereotypes are principally stemmed from the concept of androcentricity which reads that the man is the foremost and potent sex which must dominate and display sway upon women.

5.1 Deficit Theory

As its name indicates, the deficit theory considers women's modes of speaking as an essentially “deficient” version of men's language (Sadiqi, 2003; 4). The essentialist view was the bedrock of this theory concerning the relationship between gender and language. Along this line of thought, a host of essentialist theories in language and gender studies have so far discerned gender as a possession of a set of behaviours which is imposed by the speech community upon women and men as adhering to two different categories. It must be noted that speech community, as defined by Bloomfield, is “a group of people who interact by means of speech” (1933: 42) (Quoted in Abdelhay, 2008:24). Abdelhay (2008) states that essentialism appears to validate gender differences and gender dominance by virtue of biology, culture stereotypes or all together. According to the bifurcated essentialist view of gender and language, it is possible to state that gender can be seen from three eminent clusters of characteristics: innateness, strict binarism, and bipolarisation. Gender is described as innate in the sense that biological endowments were innate; it is bipolar, mainly, because human beings belong to one of the two bipolar categories: male or female (Sadiqi, 2003). Ennaji (2008) provides insight into the representation of women in traditional Moroccan proverbs. According to Ennaji, these proverbs were based on ignored gender stereotypes that delineated women as powerless, inferior, and dependent on men. According to Ennaji (2008), proverbs are imbued with culture, and are worth-investigating and studying, provided that learners do not take the gender-biased proverbs for granted. Similar findings have been reached by Al-

Zubaidi (2019) who demonstrates that Iraqi proverbs are used to entrench the traditional ideals of hegemonic masculinity, patriarchal ideology and gender inequality. Muhsin (2015) dissects the educational and psychological dimensions in the Iraqi Folk proverbs and shows that there are some negative psychological connotations, particularly in the relationship between a man and a woman like meanness, superiority, empty pride and selfishness.

In the same vein of thought, one of the most pervasive characteristics of the essentialist model was bipolarization. The categories "male" and "female" were tacitly assumed to be homogeneous, opposite, rigid, invariable and strict complementary distribution (ibid). To put it briefly, a human being is either fully male or fully female; nothing is welcomed in between. In tune with the essentialist model, the deficit theory of language and gender portrays women as deficient and excluded; it states that language ignores women, deprecates and defines them as inferior to men.

According to Lakoff's model, Albeit women are supposed bilinguals in knowing both men's and women's language (Lakoff, 1975) and oft-cited superior female language abilities, female's linguistic behaviours of handling communication are often evaluated as handicapped, maladaptive, and needing remediation (Henley and Kramarae, 1991). Lakoff was the first feminist linguist who delineated the features of women's use of language and conversational rules in terms of their lexical selections and the syntactical formation of their utterances. It is, accordingly, possible to aver that Lakoff's endeavour to lead a close scrutiny about women's modes of speaking is a robust genesis of the modern study of language and gender. Beyond this level, she went on to claim that the speech patterns attributed to women are weak, trivial and uncertain in comparison with men's modes of seapeaking and reasoning. This can be demonstrated, according to Lakoff, through the elaboration of a number of features that she believed were characteristics of "women's language". Lakoff (1975) tends to reckon reasons why, in her view, women's language is seen as hesitant and deficient than men's linguistic features. By this token, Lakoff (1975) delineates women as having been taught to adopt linguistic styles in ways that relegate them to submissive status in society. According to her hypothesis, employing tag questions such as: "isn't it?" "don't we?" "is, in point of fact, deemed as a signal of women's trivialized and frivolous speech. "tag question" can signal politeness, emphasis or irony, and it may suggest confidence or lack of it.

As the essentialist model strives to state, a wide range of stereotypes are lucidely androcentric. By androcentric, it is meant the notion that man is the foremost part which dominates and exhibits sovereignty upon women. This concept is attested by the fact that many gender stereotypes sketch the females in a negative manner that under-represent their status-quo.

5.2 The Difference Theory

Despite the lack of empirical evidence, the accepted conclusions of Lakoff (1975) led to an emphasis on training women to remediate this suggested negative styles. Along this line of thinking, the goal of this assertiveness training is to boost women to stop using inferior "women's language" and commence to adopt the superior "men's language" as an alternative mode of speaking. The retort of this assertiveness movement was that it took into consideration solely one side of the problem. In a nutshell, if women require assertiveness training to counter socialized passivity, men may need to counter socialized insensitivity and passivity.

Along this line of thinking, the assertiveness model pictures men's communication styles are flawless by putting the burden merely on women to upgrade and reframe their speech styles that were seen as being ineffective. Maltz and Borker's cultural approach ignores the possibility that the linguistic remediation may be requisite for both sexes. However, the acknowledgment of this one-sided approach led to the proliferation of what is labelled the "two-culture" approach by Maltz and Borker (1982), which postulates that men and women may face communication problems because they come from very distinct cultural backgrounds. Bay way of explanation, Talbot (2010) discerns that children, very often grow up; spending their time playing in single-sex- groups:

Boys and girls group seem to be rather different, so that children grow up, of an extent, in gender specific cultures; they learn about such things as how to interact in friendly way from their peers rather than from adults. Consequently, learning cross-sex talk can be a big problem in childhood

(Talbot, 2010:80).

Before knocking the door of adult communication, they argue that boys and girls learn to do different things during play. Girls learn to create and build cooperative relationships with others on an equal basis, in an endeavour to eschew any kind of disapproval which may be directed to them by others, and to exhibit empathy to their playmates. On the other side, boys engaging in plays seem to reveal the ways they learnt to be dominant with much assertiveness of themselves. Study after study, Maltz & Borker (1982) assert, spelling out miscellaneous and several striking differences in male and female contributions to cross-sex conversation. They suppose that girls and boys grow up in distinct sociolinguistic cultures that constitute the bedrock of their future behaviours and alignments. Within this caveat in mind, both women and men are required to respect the social and cultural expectations of gender norms.

5.3 Social Power

When the man says to his wife "Is there any Ketchup? The message is virtually "Bring it to me". If the daughter, however, asks the same question, it is much more likely that the mother will respond by merely informing her that it is in the cupboard (Edwards, 2009: 139). Great social power gives men:

"the right to pay less attention to or discount, women's protests, the right to be less adept at interpreting their communications that women are of men's, the right to believe women are inscrutable" (Henley & Kramarae, 1991 : 42).

Along this line of thought, social power provides men with the capability to turn definitions of the situation into physical violence (Henley & Kramarae, 1991). So, if the trouble really evolved from cultural difference solely, would we have such scenarios? This theory sustains the idea that men's conversational dominance parallels their social/political dominance and, hence, they adopt it as a vehicle to corroborate the effectiveness of their speech.

More importantly, there are two social power-based explanations that have been pointed for differences in women's and men's speech in cross-sex conversation as Henley & Kramarae (1991: 45) put it:

Social power (a): this explanation reads that men's conversational dominance is analogous to their social/political dominance; men use their power as a vehicle to underpin the effectiveness of their speech. Maltz and Borker (1982) state that men avail dominion offered by patriarchal basis and this can mirrored, in turn, in the power exerted in conversations.

It must be noted that according to the theory of social power, women are unsuited to wield power over men. To be socially acceptable as women, women cannot, in the words of Maltz and Borker, *"exert control and must actually support men in their control"* (1982: 164).

Social power (b): According to this explanation, gender inequality enters the conversational flow through the mechanism of gender role training, which serves to obscure the issue of power. When men display power, they are not necessarily flouting power in a conscious manner, but merely *"reaping the rewards given them by the social system"* (ibid).

6. Idioms Reinforcing Gender Stereotypes

This may be interpreted in the light of the idea that the use of power by men is an unconscious echo of gender role prescriptions and expectations.

The female deficit theory has an indelible mark on the stereotypes as socially shared conceptions of women and men. By this token, these cultural conceptions give birth to gender-related expectations and ideas which, in turn, press and even coerce people into gendered roles and norms as they are flickering in and out people's attitudes and impressions.

Inasmuch as this study directs a limelight on the idiomatic expressions which under-represent Algerian women, we are going to focus our attention, principally, on the stereotypes which express dwell on the view that women are underprivileged and co-opted, and that men are the only ones that possess a *savoir-faire* and aplomb. Albeit the cultural proliferation of civilization in Algeria, the latter seems to be rife with a variety of stereotypes that picture the system of the human organisation generating distinctive cultural patterns and institutions interlinked by social relationships.

It seems that the female deficit theory has an indelible mark on stereotypes as socially shared conceptions of women and men, and how these cultural conceptions give birth to gender-related expectations and ideas which, in turn, press and even coerce people into gendered roles and norms because gender stereotypes exhibit a form of cultural knowledge to which everyone has constantly been exposed. Stereotypes are not necessarily valid, yet they tend to "stick" to your head." (Rudman & Glick, 2008)

Since we are dealing with the implications of the deficit theory, we will focus our attention, principally, on those which corroborate the view that women are underprivileged and co-opted, and that men are the only ones that possess a *savoir-faire* and aplomb. Some popular stereotypes usually picture women as trivial and deprived; they overtly see that men are more serious and possess higher value than women. A stereotype is used, as a term, by linguists to refer to the different beliefs about language, for example as Abdelhay (2008:46) states, the belief that women's gossip which has, for a long time, been a favourable burning issue for linguists and non-linguists. Gender stereotypes are intimately related with and corroborate gender ideologies to which women should accommodate their behaviour. They function to foster hegemonic male dominance and female subordination.

Moreover, Mills (2003) reinforces that stereotype may represent negative affects to both women and men, since they are comprised of notions which may totally differ from our own recognition and perception of ourselves. Femininity means, for the most part, being physically attractive, adore children, care about them and home making. These features are, de facto, claimed to be prototypically allotted to women as a biological part of being female, whilst *"one of the defining features of masculinity is seen to be aggression, which is often considered to a biological part of being male (caused by testosterone)..."* *Masculinity is often described in terms of battle and warfare"* (Mills, 2003: 188).

In spite of the cultural progress and the proliferation of civilization in our society, the latter is mainly saturated with a variety of stereotypes that picture the system of the human organisation generating distinctive cultural patterns and institutions interlinked by social relations. One eminent spotlight, in the sphere of sociolinguistics, lies mainly in dissecting how popular and cultural stereotypes, about women and men, reflect their linguistic behaviours. For instance, gender stereotypes in Moroccan culture may be divided into two types: explicit and implicit. Explicit stereotypes put emphasis on both positive and negative attitudes of society in general, and men in particular, towards women (Sadiqi, 2003). Men show, for example, positive impressions towards mothers and "good" wives, but negative attitudes towards women who attempt to exert dominance and enact leadership. The gender binary opposition of gender norms may expound these attitudes as the repercussion of the fear jeopardizing men's status-quo. Explicit stereotypes corroborate the intimate relationship between women and their homes and deny any active participation of women in the public sphere such as the street, politics and leadership positions. Accordingly, this kind of stereotypes can be well-illustrated in the two popular sayings in Algerian Arabic (1) **[fawər lmra wala ddir 3la raiha]** (consult a woman but do not take her opinion into consideration) and (2) **[lmra 3qalha sghir]** (a woman's mind is small]. By analogy to the Moroccan culture about gender

stereotypes, Algerian Arabic has ample evidence of the negative attitudes towards women's verbal behaviour. By way of explanation, Abdelhay (2008) states that if we espy beyond being a human being of female sex, the word [mra] (a woman) connotes the physical and the mental weakness and immaturity, elucidating this by exhibiting the cultural equation of femininity and powerlessness via real-life examples such as (3) [mæddirf 3liha hadik ghir mra] (don't take her into account, she is only a woman) which portray her as immature and deprived (p. 62). In support of this, we have widely heard expressions such as (4) [nta gæ3 mahbu:l dir 3la mra] (you are crazy to believe a woman). Like the above explanations revealed by Sadiqi (2003) and Abdelhay (2008), this example refers, for the most part, to the pettiness of the woman, and depicts her as immature and empty-headed. More importantly, the renowned Berber saying (5) [mahadrən jargazən, 0ilawin tsusumənt] (when men speak, women should quieten) makes us keenly aware of the conventional rule that calls for the necessity to respect men when they speak. As for implicit stereotypes, they constitute the number of internalized attitudes and beliefs about gender as a social category, which are the result of the unconscious socialization and the accumulateness of daily behaviour, at home, at school, at work, etc. That is to say, Algerian women are implicitly assumed to be weak public leaders, poor interlocutors particularly in serious matters, etc. Such implicit stereotypes “operate in a way which often escapes conscious control and end up by constituting some kind of symbolic law for the member of the community” (Sadiqi, 2005). Compared to explicit stereotypes, implicit ones are particularly rigid and pernicious.

Such implicit stereotypes function in a way which often transgress perceptible monitoring and end up by constituting some kind of symbolic law for the member of the community. Compared to explicit stereotypes, implicit ones are particularly rigid and pernicious in reflecting a particular prejudice or bias. It is worth paying careful attention to the following adage which is conspicuously an idiomatic expression which reinforces social illustration of the general belief about men's sway; as if females deprive their existence from males (6) [ɖal rædzəl wala ɖal harɖ] (Man's shadow is better than wall's shadow).

This sequence is widely known to denote the exigency of men in the social life of women. In Algeria, it seems that a great number of people widely believe that it must be better for a woman to bear and endure her husband even if he is bestial and brutal (Babou, 2012). She has not the right to complain or return to her family home after she got married; They bear the idea that a divorced woman would be underprivileged and lacking the rights and advantages of the members of society. Interestingly, it would be relevant to state that the intention of the above explanation is not to sketch men as savage or brutish, but we think that it might be the best illustration to elucidate the hidden connotation of the previous saying and popular stereotypes. In short, our immediate concern through the foregoing survey is to flash the various sayings people usually use to convey the generic consensus upon to women's subordination and domination by men. By analogy to Moroccan studies (Sadiqi, 2005; Ennadji, 2008), a wide range of idioms and stereotypes are blatantly androcentric. By androcentric, is meant the notion that man is the foremost part which dominates and exhibits sovereignty upon the woman. This concept is attested by the fact that a host of gender stereotypes portray the female sex in a negative manner. Males are, in general, the core power from which females derive their stamina to carry on their lives, as is defined by Dealey and Ward (2009:127)

“Andocentric is the view that male sex is primary and the female secondary in the organic scheme, that all things center, as it were, about necessary in carrying out the scheme, is only the means of continuing the life of the globe, but is otherwise and important accessory and incidental factor in”

We have tremendously revealed the two terms “sex” and “gender” throughout the preceding pages, yet without providing a clear-cut definition of the two concepts till now. Above all, the simplest explanation of gender is

“a social instruction organized around biological sex. Individuals are born male or female, but they acquire over time a gender identity that is what it means to be male or female”
(Gregson, 1997) (Quoted in Buckingham, 2000:53).

From this vantage point, we should note that by sex, is meant to be the biological traits of the human being, whether male or female. It has to do with anatomy and physiology. Meanwhile, “Gender” as a term differs from “sex” in being about the socially and psychologically expected characteristics rather than the biological organs provided by nature.

Conclusion

The Algerian culture is replete with a ponderous evidence of the negative attitudes towards women's modes of behaving and speaking. Women are, according to that type of stereotypes, as callow and empty-headed and they are, therefore, unsuited to wield power over men. To sharpen the idea, these popular stereotypes are principally stemmed from the concept of androcentricity which reads that the man is the foremost and potent sex which must dominate and display sway upon women. Stereotypes, as intertwined with idiomatic expressions, are engendered and perpetuated by the social meanings they are given in the Algerian socio-cultural context.

Overall, this paper is an intent to flash how idioms are employed to convey the generic consensus upon to women's subordination and domination by men. On the whole, people's impressions are not necessarily correct, yet we are, in some ways, inclined to discern to what extent the persuasive negative stereotypes do influence our interpretation of male/female linguistic practices and their failure of communication most of the times. Idioms sustain hegemonic male dominance and female subordination. They offer a crucial avenue for the feminist concern of identifying patriarchal gender ideologies in order to boost them and enhance the development of gender ideologies that offer and encourage positive experiences for women.

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Author's Biographies

BOUKHELEF Faiza, est enseignante-chercheure de grade MCA à l'Université Hassiba Benbouali de Chlef. Directrice du Laboratoire de *l'information* et la communication dans l'enseignement des langues étrangères et traduction; éditrice en cheffe de la revue Journal of Languages & Translation de l'Université de Chlef. Auteure de plusieurs articles scientifiques, elle a organisé des journées d'étude, des colloques nationaux et internationaux. Ses travaux de recherche portent essentiellement sur la traductologie.

BABOU Amina, est enseignante-chercheure de grade MCA à l'Université Hassiba Benbouali de Chlef. Chef d'équipe du Laboratoire de *l'information* et la communication dans l'enseignement des langues étrangères et traduction. Auteure de plusieurs articles scientifiques, elle a participé à l'organisation des journées d'étude, des colloques nationaux et internationaux. Ses travaux de recherche portent essentiellement sur la sociolinguistique.