

THE GENDER VARIABLE IN THE MEANINGS OF THREE ENGLISH ADDRESS TERMS BY TEACHERS IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper was to investigate the range of meanings assigned to the address terms *madam*, *boss* and *my dear* in English usage in Kenya, with gender as an independent variable. A questionnaire was used to elicit responses from 30 practicing teachers: 15 females and 15 males. The respondents were first asked to assign meanings to the three terms by choosing from a list of proposed meanings. From the results, more female teachers assigned more meanings to *madam* than their male counterparts. On the other hand, the female teachers assigned more meanings to *boss* than the male. However, regarding *my dear*, it is in fact the male teachers who assigned (slightly) more meanings to the phrase than their female counterparts. Beyond the mere range of meanings, the results further revealed that in English usage in Kenya the three address terms have undergone semantic broadening in some of their meanings and semantic narrowing in some others, with reference to their meanings given in international English dictionaries.

INTRODUCTION

Eckert and McConnel-Ginnet define address terms as “terms used to call people or get their attention or make explicit the identity of the person being spoken to or our relationship with that person”. They add that the address terms include both “forms that refer to (i.e. talk about rather than call out) whoever is being addressed, the addressee, and those used in addressing an addressee” (Eckert and McConnel-Ginnet 2003:135). Address terms thus go beyond referring to a person who is present in a face-to-face exchange to talking about them

when they are not physically present during a conversation.

For their part, Wardhaugh and Fuller analyze how people name or address others. They view address and name as serving the same purpose of catching a person’s attention. According to the authors, some of the ways in which a person’s attention can be caught include the use of title (T), first name (FN), last name (LN) or nickname (Wardhaugh and Fuller 2015: 266). They further observe that “[...] titles like Sir or Madam are generalized variants of the T(Title) category, that is, generic titles and forms like Mack, Buddy, Jack or Mate are generic first names (FN) [...]”. (p. 268). Based on this distinction, this paper will treat *Madam* and *Boss* as generic titles. Wardhaugh and Fuller add that “Address by title alone is the least intimate form of address in that titles usually designate ranks or occupations, [...]. They are devoid of ‘personal’ content”. [...] (while) using a nickname or pet name shows an even greater intimacy.” (Wardhaugh and Fuller 2015: 268). They give the use of honey as an example of a pet name. This paper will equally treat *my dear* as a variant of generic FN, that is, a pet name.

Some analysis of how titles (as forms of address) are used in English in Kenya appears in Buregeya (2018), who analyses a number of address terms used in professional/academic circles and those used in political ones. The professional titles that he analyses are *Sir*, *Madam*, *Ma’am*, *Miss*, *Mr.* (sometimes replaced by the Swahili term *Bwana*), *Mrs.*, *Teacher* (and its Kiswahili translation *mwalimu*), *doctor* (sometimes shortened to *doc*), its Kiswahili translation *Daktari*, *Professor*

(usually shortened to *Prof.*) and *Engineer*. The political address term that he discusses is Honourable (and its Kiswahili translation *Mheshimiwa*).

With regard to *madam*, the use of which is the subject of the present study, Buregeya makes two key observations: first *madam* (stressed on the first syllable, as in StdIntE) is used by juniors to address their superiors, especially when prefixed to their professional title; second, women lecturers do not like being addressed as *madam* presumably because they find it belittling, since, according to Buregeya it refers to lower-rank people in other professions, such as ‘the [administrative] chief’s wife’, ‘the terrible, feared woman/wife’, ‘the local female primary school teacher’, and ‘the female prison warder’. He points out that a term that refers to such professions ‘would be belittling to a university lecturer’ (Buregeya 2018).

Inspired by Buregeya’s observations above, the present study wanted to learn more about the meanings of *madam*, from a larger and more systematically selected sample than that used by in the literature, and one which specifically uses gender as an independent variable. The study extended its scope to include the terms *boss* and *my dear* (neither of which have been studied before, which are very frequent in day-to-day conversations (whether face-to-face or over the phone) in English usage in Kenya.

The term *madam*

The meanings assigned to *madam* from the choices proposed by the researcher are: a female teacher (13 males;14 females), a married woman (6 males;6 females), the local chief’s wife (3 males; 5 females), a smartly dressed woman (12 males;11 females), a woman who holds an important position e.g. a cabinet secretary (12 males; 12 females), a teacher trainee (6 males; 6 females), a prison warder (5 males;9

females) , a female police officer (8 males;13 females), and one’s own wife or somebody else’s wife (4 males; 6 females). In addition, the respondents suggested other meanings of *madam* which are : a female boss (2 males;3 females), a senator (1 male; 0 females), a polite way of addressing a lady you do not know by name (1 male; 2 females), a respectable lady (1 male; 3 females), any lady irrespective of designation (2 males; 2 females), a formal address to a woman (1 male; 0 females), a junior female worker whom one needs a favour/service from (1 male; 0 females), a young girl/woman (1 male; 0 females), any woman above 23 years (1 male; 1 female), a rich woman (0 males; 1 female), a church minister’s wife (0 males; 1 female), working class lady [sic] (0 males; 1 female), a female colleague (0 males; 1 female), any female above 18 years (0 males; 1 female).

The meanings reported in the preceding paragraph, which will be considered to be the Kenyan English meanings, were compared with those given in two international English dictionaries: *The Oxford Dictionary of English*, 3rd edition (2010) – hereafter the *OED* 2010, and the *Collins English Dictionary*, 10th edition (2009) –hereafter the *CED* 2009. For his part, Swan, writing on address terms in British English, observes that, ‘*Sir* and *Madam* are used in Britain mostly by people in service occupations (e.g. shop assistants). *Dear Sir* and *Dear Madam* are common ways of beginning letters to strangers [...]. In other situations *sir* and *madam* are unusual in British English’ (Swan 2005: 339). Based on Swan’s observations and the dictionary meanings of *madam*, it can be observed that there are variations in its use in Kenya. For instance, *Madam* is not used mostly by people in service occupations and it is commonly used. For example, students frequently use *madam* when addressing their female teachers. It is also to refer to people in professions such as those in the uniformed

forces besides referring to people who are not in a profession such as ‘a married woman’. In addition, two out of the five definitions suggested in the dictionary for *madam* were not relevant in Kenyan English. *Madam* does not reflect the informal meaning of ‘a conceited or bossy girl or young woman’, and ‘a woman who is in charge of prostitutes in a brothel’. However, the *CED* meaning of a ‘woman [...] of high social status’, seems to have been expanded to encompass other conceptually related meanings like ‘a smartly dressed woman’. *Madam* can also be used in a reciprocal manner since a person who is of a high social status can use it to address a female of a lower social status as is the case amongst *tutors* and *teacher trainees* or when ‘one is seeking for a favour from a junior’ person.

The term *boss*

The meanings assigned to *boss* from the choices proposed by the researcher are: hierarchical male boss (12 males; 13 females), somebody’s husband (0 males; 5 females), a stranger who is smartly dressed (8 males; 5 females), a big bodied man (7 males; 5 females), a male police officer (5 males; 9 females), a male customer e.g. at a hotel (6 males; 5 females). The other meanings of *boss* suggested by the respondents themselves are: an immediate supervisor (1 male; 3 females), a supervisor who is overbearing (1 male; 0 females), owner of business/company/CEO (1 male; 0 females), an employer (1 male; 1 female), head of institution/ manager (2 males; 2 females), a rich man (1 male; 1 female), man/woman who holds a position or rank (1 male; 0 females), head of criminal gang (1 male; 0 females), used by junior when seeking favours from male supervisor (1 male; 0 females), one’s male supervisor (0 males; 1 female), a hierarchical female boss (0 males; 1 female), a male person in command (0 males; 1 female), a male

person you depend upon (0 males; 1 female), any male above 18 years (0 males; 1 female), used casually by males when addressing one another (0 males; 1 male), a ‘sheng’ term used to refer to a leader within an informal group setting e.g. university friend’s group (0 males; 1 female), a man who may not be in high hierarchy but influential position e.g. watchman, clerk (0 males; 1 female), a leader (0 males; 1 female), one who is senior in employment (0 male; 1 female), a male holding high office (0 males; 1 female), and a male teacher (0 males; 1 females).

The meanings reported in the paragraph above, which will be assumed to be reflective of Kenyan English meanings, were compared with those given in: *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, 9th edition 2015 - hereafter *OALD* 2015; *CED* 2009, and *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 5th edition 2009 – hereafter *LCDE* 2009. It is notable that the gender of *boss* is not specified from the definition, which means that both males and females can qualify as *boss*. However, in English usage in Kenya, it appears that the term *boss* has almost been limited to males only. From the suggested meanings of *boss* in the dictionaries, the *CED* one of a professional politician who controls a party machine or political organization, often using devious or illegal methods’, does not seem to occur in Kenyan English usage. However, other references such as ‘any male who is above eighteen years’, ‘a casual term used by males when addressing one another’ and ‘used by a junior when seeking favours from male supervisors’ are not given in any dictionary. In addition, the term is much broadened in Kenyan English to include the following meanings which are not in dictionaries: ‘somebody’s husband’, ‘a stranger who is smartly dressed’, ‘a big bodied man’, ‘a police officer’, and ‘a customer, e.g. at a hotel’.

The phrase *my dear*

The meanings assigned to my dear from the choices proposed by the researcher are: somebody's wife/ a man referring to his wife (11 males;9 females), a young lady/woman (7 males; 6 females), a female friend (9 males; 13 females), a middle-aged lady (2 males; 4 females), a colleague (irrespective of gender) (6 males; 11 females) and any lady or woman (5 males; 4 females). The additional meanings of *my dear* suggested by the respondents themselves are: It can serve as a greeting e.g. Dear Mary (1 male;0 females) , used in a patronizing way to put down a female colleague (1 male; 0 females), to show surprise or perplexity (1 male; 0 females), a lady relative whom you respect (1male; 0 females), a member of the opposite sex (1 male; 0 females), a concubine (1 male; 0 females), a passionate friend irrespective of gender/ any friend/ pals/ close friend of either gender/ a sign of friendship (3 males; 2 females), shows level of closeness i.e. non-formal (1 male; 0 females), a way of addressing a person, male or female, that you are dear to/a loved person/ highly valued (1 male;2 females), a close family member (1 male; 0 females), someone who needs help and whom you have pity on (1male; 0 females), one that you have a lot of regard for e.g. son, daughter, mom or dad etc./one's child irrespective of gender/ a child (e.g. a parent referring to his child) (2 males; 2 females), lovers (used to refer to one of opposite sex) (1 male; 0 females), a male friend (0 males; 1 female), shows courtesy/shows kindness or humility before the concerned (0 males; 1 female) and anybody, male or female, whom one is in 'close' contact to [sic] e.g. a friend or colleague, a seminar mate even to someone in the opposition during a debate (0 males;1 female).

From the responses that were proposed by the researcher, the highest frequency of *my dear* by both males and females is for 'a female friend'. However, it is important to note that *my dear* seems to

have been popularized by the media, particularly, a morning radio programme on a local station, Classic FM. One of the two male presenters, Maina Wa Kageni, addresses any lady caller as *my dear* or *darling*. The fact that the presenter does not personally know the callers, shows that the women cannot be described as people who are 'loved' by him. Possibly, his address confirms what Kramsch (1998) suggests that "Speech tends to be people-centred, writing tends to be topic-centred [...], speakers not only focus on their topic, but try to engage their listeners as well, and appeal to their senses and emotions". His use of such an endearing term may be a way of appealing to the emotions of his listeners, particularly the women.

On the differences between men's and women's language, Wardhaugh observes that "Women tend to use linguistic devices that stress solidarity more often than men do" (Wardhaugh 2010: 342). This is exemplified by a female respondent who suggested that *my dear* can mean '[...] a seminar mate [...]'. Such a person would be considered almost a stranger since these people are likely to have only met for an official function. Similarly, a suggestion of '[...] someone in the opposition during a debate' as a referent shows that women would be more tolerant even to a person who has an opposing idea. A suggestion by one male that it is 'used [...] to put down a female colleague', also supports Wardhaugh's view that "[...] men tend to interact in ways which will maintain and increase their power and status" (Wardhaugh 2010: 342).

There are other meanings that were suggested by males and that describe or relate to women but which are not reflected in the dictionaries. These are: 'used [...] put down a female colleague', 'a concubine' and 'a lady relative whom you respect'. The suggested meaning of 'someone who needs help and whom you have pity on' does not also easily fit in the suggested dictionary meanings. Perhaps, it falls in the category

of '[...] exclamations of surprise or dismay, such as Oh dear! and dear me!'. The observable difference however is that the *OALD*'s examples of its use are "directed" at the speaker himself/ herself and not at another person. Its use in Kenya as suggested by respondents shows that it is directed at another person and not on the speaker. However, the responses for *my dear* did not denote the nominal meaning of 'a kind person (informal)' showing that this meaning does not appear to be conceptualized in Kenyan English. Other meanings of the word that were suggested show the meanings of *dear* as an adjective and as an interjection although the emphasis of the paper was on its nominal meanings. Such responses clearly show that the respondents are aware of the other syntactic categories of this term. The omission of the other adjectival meanings, such as 'appealing or pretty' and 'highly priced', which were not suggested at all may thus be a pointer that these are not common meanings of *dear*. In addition, no respondent proposed its adverbial meaning of 'at a high cost' and its idiomatic use of '[...] dear old/little [...]'. The predominant use of the term seems to refer to people, more specifically, to their love and friendship and not to their material possessions.

CONCLUSION

This paper analysed the meanings of *madam*, *boss* and *my dear* as address terms among teachers in Kenya. The results were obtained from a three-part questionnaire that had a number of proposed meanings to choose from and an additional question

eliciting more possible meanings from the respondents. From the results, the female teachers assigned more meanings to *madam* than the males. However, females made more choices for *boss* than those made by the males. Regarding *my dear*, the male teachers assigned a few more meanings to the phrase than their female counterparts.

The general observation from the study is that the meanings of the three address terms in Kenyan English are by and large in agreement with those given in international English dictionaries. However, each one of those address terms has undergone semantic broadening and semantic narrowing. For instance, in Kenyan English usage the term *madam* does not mean 'a woman who is in charge of prostitutes in a brothel', which is an indication of semantic narrowing. However, the same term has been semantically broadened to mean 'female teachers' and 'smartly dressed women', meanings that are not available in international English dictionaries. Similarly, the semantic range of the term *boss* has been broadened to refer to 'somebody's husband' and 'a stranger who is smartly dressed', among other meanings which are not recorded in international dictionaries. However, the meaning of *boss* is semantically narrowed as it does not mean 'a professional politician who controls a party machine or political organization, often using devious or illegal methods' as is its use in the U.S. (*CED*). *My dear* has also broadened its semantic range to include 'a concubine', but its meaning is narrowed as it is not interpreted to mean 'a kind person (informal)'.

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