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Language and Gender
Male Domination among the Kikuyu of Kenya, East Africa

Engelska
C-uppsats

Termin: Vårterminen 2006
Handledare: Michael Wherrity
Abstract

Language and gender is one of the most intriguing and interesting areas in sociolinguistic study. It investigates how men and women (or boys and girls) use language differently in social contexts.

Extensive study and research has been carried out in this field, particularly in regard to the English language. Eminent linguists such as Ronald Wardhaugh, David Crystal, Ralph Fasold, and Deborah Tannen have studied varying male-female use of the English language. They have also attempted comparison with other languages and cultures. Wardhaugh, for instance, has studied male-female use of language in English, American-Indian languages (such as Gros Ventre), Asian and Oriental languages (Yukaghir, Japanese) among others, and his findings have become the subject several of his published works.

In their investigations they have found that almost invariably, the way men use language shows them to be socially dominant over women. This persists even in such cases as in the Malagasy language spoken in Madagascar, where men display linguistic characteristics more popularly associated with women and vice versa (Wardhaugh).

This paper seeks to determine whether men use language to dominate women among the Kikuyu ethnic group of Kenya, East Africa, to which I belong. Areas such as terms used to refer to men and women, taboo language and language use in marital situations are examined, among others. I also attempt to find out what influence this has had on English spoken in Kenya.

Keywords: Kikuyu, man, woman, speech, language, gender, conversation, non-standard language, linguistic, taboo, tradition, discourse, domination, submission
1. Introduction

It has frequently been observed that female speech is different from male speech, and that the differences occur in various areas. Just as men and women differ in physical appearance and choice of clothing, so, too, does their language differ. Research has been carried out into the various areas in which these differences occur, and the reasons for them occurring.

Men and women use language differently as they talk among themselves. Men tend to speak loudly and aggressively. They interrupt, compete with and tease each other more, and usually speak on topics that bring out these aspects, such as sports. Women, on the other hand, do not interrupt each other as much. They use talk mainly to establish and maintain personal relationships, and share confidences and feelings. Their topics of choice are usually the self, feelings, affiliation with others, home and family (Wardhaugh 1998: 316). In cross-sex discourse, according to Wardhaugh (1998: 316), men interrupt women more frequently than women interrupt men. Women will ask more questions, encourage others to speak more and will not protest as much as men do at being interrupted. Men, on the other hand, tend to monopolize the conversation. They interrupt, challenge and argue more and try harder to control the topic. They are also more likely to make authoritative statements. Tannen (1996: 36) says that men, in conversation, may use silence to dominate and silence women. Victoria Leto DeFrancisco (1998: 179), in her study of seven married couples conversing with each other, draws the same conclusion, also noting that men also use interruption as a domination strategy.

Generally, women are under more pressure to conform to social linguistic behaviour than men are, such as use of standard language and avoidance of profanity. Trudgill (2000: 70) says that research has shown women to use linguistic forms closer to the standard variety than men do; for example, in Detroit women use less multiple negation, e.g. “I don’t
want none” than men do. Men seem less linguistically influenced by others. They also like to project an image of themselves as tough and masculine, and see nonstandard language and profanity as showing these traits (Wardhaugh 1998: 314).

Wardhaugh (1998: 318-319) observes that various claims have been made to account for these differences. One is that language is sexist. Another is that society has a “hierarchical set of power relationships” in which language behaviour reflects male social dominance. Yet another is that men and women have learned to act in certain ways and follow different rules of language use; linguistically speaking, men learn to be men and women learn to be women.

3. Aims

As the differences given above may suggest, in most societies language use by men and women reflects male dominance. Men exercise control and wield power over women in society, and this is usually shown in the language. This dominance may persist even in cases where traditional gender roles appear reversed, as will be explained later on. My aim is to determine if this holds true for the Kikuyu ethnic group in Kenya, East Africa. I investigate if, indeed, the Kikuyu language reflects male dominance over women, and how any such linguistically-expressed dominance is reflected in Kenyan English.

2. Background: Research into men’s and women’s language

2.1 Linguistic differences

Research has been carried out in communities in which male-female language differs phonologically. For example, among the Gros Ventre, an American Indian tribe, men use palatalized dental stops where women use palatalized velar stops; when saying “bread” a man would say /djatsa/ where a woman would say /kjatsa/ (Trudgill, 2000: 64). Among the
Zulu, women use the sound /dab/ where men use /z/, as in /amandabi/ vis a vis /amanzi/. It is the women who are forbidden to use the phonological forms used by males, sometimes upon pain of death; this accounts for the difference.

There are also morphological differences in male and female language. In Japanese, women show their sex in speech by attaching the articles *ne* or *wa* to the end of their sentences. Thai women use the first-person pronoun *dichan* in speech, while men use *phom* (Wardhaugh 1998: 313).

Research has also pointed to women using different intonational patterns from men; Brend (Wardhaugh 1998: 314) says that women use patterns more associated with unsureness, indirectness and politeness than men, ostensibly because they are less sure of themselves. Deborah Tannen (1996: 32) says that women may be indirect in conversation because they feel less entitled to make demands, or would rather not explicitly state an idea in case they have to take it back later.

### 2.2 Differences in language use

It has already been established that female speech is different from male speech. Closer examination of these differences reveals that men hold the linguistic advantage over women. According to Wardhaugh (1998: 311) the prevailing pattern is the use of male speech to set the standard by which female speech is judged, even though as mentioned earlier the former is less standard. Wardhaugh (1998: 311) gives the example of former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, who had been advised to lower the pitch and range of her voice and speak more slowly and authoritatively to make herself heard; in other words, to sound like a man.

Moreover, men are not as restricted by social conventions of language use as much as women are. Men can curse and swear more freely than women can, and do not feel
as compelled to use “correct” language; they find solidarity in the feelings and image of “toughness” produced by using nonstandard language (Wardhaugh 1998: 314). Women, on the other hand, are judged differently for using nonstandard language and swearing. For instance, from various television programs and films I have watched, the stereotype of a woman “from the wrong side of the tracks”, usually referred to as “trailer trash”, is a trash-talking, swearing, loud and uncouth woman. A man doing the same would be more likely to seem tough and masculine. The argument is that women are not allowed to display “toughness” at all, especially through language.

Furthermore, male vs. female discourse usually exhibits the prevailing power relationship in society, with men dominating women (Wardhaugh 1998: 317). Society seems to dictate that women defer to men. In the use of body language and gestures women are usually required to seem submissive to men (Wardhaugh 1998: 314). Among the Araucanian Indians of Chile a woman is required to keep silent in her husband’s presence, and in gatherings where men are present to speak in a whisper if at all, and then only if spoken to (Wardhaugh 1998: 314).

One may also observe that women are usually left out of “important” discussions held by men, as if they did not have the capacity to grasp the subject matter. In many societies, issues that are deemed important are often tackled by men in the absence of women; to use a literary example, in her novel Nervous Conditions Tsitsi Dangarembga describes a situation where a woman, Maiguru, prepares twice a day “a special pot of refrigerated meat for the patriarchy to eat as they planned and constructed the family’s future” (Dangarembga 1988: 135-136). This implies that as the men discuss the family’s future, the women are supposed to be busy in the kitchen, their only contribution to the discussion being the food. Visualize, in a hypothetical movie or television program, an expensively-dressed man in a restaurant or club with a female companion. When his friends come over to discuss
something the man may say to the woman, “Leave us, we have business to discuss.” In political dialogue women are often left out; this is demonstrated by the paucity of female representation in many political forums such as parliaments. For example, in my own country (Kenya), out of 228 Members of Parliament only 14 are women. The argument is that women are not seen as having much of critical importance to “say” in any situation.

As earlier stated, men try to control conversation more than women do. They are more likely to use controlling or silencing strategies than women are. These strategies include interruption, silence and verbal aggression. Deborah Tannen (1996: 36) notes that silence, as much as volubility\(^1\), can be an instrument of power in talk. She gives an example from Erica Jong’s novel *Fear of Flying*, where a woman, Isadora, wants to know why her husband Bennett is refusing to speak to her:

“Why do you turn on me? What did I do?”
Silence.
“What did I do?”
He looks at her as if not knowing were another injury.
“Look, let’s just go to sleep now. Let’s just forget it.”
“Forget what?”
He says nothing.
...
 “...It was the funeral scene... Something got you there. That was when you got depressed.”
Silence.
“Well, wasn’t it?”
Silence.
“Oh come on, Bennett, you’re making me furious. Please tell me. Please.”
(Tannen 1996: 37)

His continued silence and her continued pleas culminate in her sliding to the floor and clinging to his leg, begging him to tell her what the matter is. In this situation the man used silence as a strategy to gain control of the conversation. Victoria DeFrancisco’s findings in a study of married couples in ongoing conversation suggested that men are generally silent and that the linguistic behaviour they displayed silenced the women (DeFrancisco 1998: 179-182).

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\(^1\) talkativeness; gift of the gab (Oxford Reference Online)
Tannen (1996: 41) also adds that men are more likely than women to use verbal aggression in their effort to control an interaction. They are more competitive and more likely to engage in verbal conflict, whereas women are more cooperative in an effort to avoid conflict. In her research DeFrancisco found that the men tended to violate turn-taking conventions more than women (64% versus 36%). They would interrupt, give delayed or minimal response or none at all more than the women would. In addition, the women complained that their husbands would fake listening, offering only “token acknowledgements” like nods or monosyllables like “Ahha” (DeFrancisco 1998: 181). They would also display patronizing and “put-down” or “teachy” behaviour (DeFrancisco 1998: 181); the men seemed to talk down to them. DeFrancisco tells of one particular husband, Robert, who used slower, more articulate speech when explaining something to his wife, as if she were a child he was teaching. The study also found that the women tried harder to establish and maintain conversation, but were less successful. The husbands in the study generally seemed to be trying to trivialize their wives’ topics and concerns, and to disrupt their efforts to communicate. One husband, Bud, said he had “heard it all before” and did not feel like talking (DeFrancisco 1998: 180).

It has also been established that linguistic taboos are much more likely to apply to women than they are to men. Male versus female swearing is a case in point. In some communities speech differences are due to taboos imposed on women. Among the Zulu a woman may not use the sound /z/ in speech, or mention the names of her father-in-law or his brothers, running the risk of a death sentence upon breaking this taboo (Trudgill 2000: 64).

Perhaps no previously researched situation illustrates male social dominance better than that of the Malagasy in Madagascar (Wardhaugh 1998: 320-321). Among them, surprisingly, typical male and female linguistic traits seem to be the reverse of conventional
norm. Malagasy men use language subtly and indirectly, are more polite and indirect and avoid confrontation and verbal aggression. Women, on the other hand, are direct and straightforward in speech. They openly criticize, express anger and engage in verbal confrontation. In many societies the reverse of this situation would be the case. Yet, the linguistic qualities displayed by Malagasy men are more desired and are called upon on occasions requiring delicate diplomacy, such as inter-tribal negotiations. The women use their verbal skills in activities such as trading and bartering at the market that are not as “high-profile” as those the men engage in. Thus, even though the speech characteristics seem reversed, the men retain the upper hand.

4. Methods of investigation

For the purposes of this paper the vocabulary of the Kikuyu language was studied, in order to reveal how differences in male and female use of language may be encoded in the lexicon of the language and how these differences reveal male domination. The conversational styles of Kikuyu men and women were also analyzed, to reveal who exercises more control in conversation. Several situations where verbal interaction occurs, such as formal meetings, bride price negotiations, officiation of marital disputes and conversation between married couples were also analyzed. The question of taboo language among the Kikuyu was also examined, the objective being to determine if either gender has more freedom to use taboo language than the other. The influence of these uses of the Kikuyu language on Kenyan English was also examined.

In the analysis I relied to a considerable extent on my experience and personal intuition as a member of the Kikuyu community and a native speaker of the language. It should be noted that as there was a shortage of suitable primary information sources and reference material, my analysis was somewhat subjective. To carry out a comprehensive study
one would, in addition to having access to primary reference material, need at least a working knowledge of the Kikuyu language and be familiar with Kikuyu linguistic tradition. Having been born into a Kikuyu family and growing up in a predominantly Kikuyu society, I hope to make up for this shortcoming.

I used Inge Brinkman’s work “Kikuyu Gender Norms and Narratives” as my primary source of information. I also had recourse to a number of online publications touching on the issue of gender and dominance, as well as slang and lexicon references such as Wikipedia’s Kikuyu Proverbs.

5. Results

5.1 Brief History

The Kikuyu are an ethnic group found mostly in the central highland region of Kenya, East Africa. It is the single largest indigenous ethnic group in this country, comprising about 7.4 million or 22% of the Kenyan population (Wikipedia 2006). They are part of the larger grouping of Bantu tribes, believed to number over 400, spread out over Central, Southern and Western Africa (Wikipedia 2006). Their native tongue, Kikuyu, is one of the Bantu family of languages. Most Kikuyu grow up speaking their native language, as well as Swahili, the national language; when they go to school they also learn English, the official language.

5.2 Terms for men and women

In Kikuyu a man is referred to as muthuri or mundu murume, usually shortened to mundurume; within the context of a marital relationship the man may be referred to as mwene mucii whereas a woman is called mutumia or mundu wa nja (Brinkman 1996: 65).
These terms reveal some intriguing facts. *Mundu murume* is based on the Kikuyu root word *urume*, which means ‘courage’ or ‘bravery’ (Kariuki). The term *mwene mucii* means ‘owner of the house’ (Brinkman 1996: 65). *Mutumia* is based on the Kikuyu root word *tumia*, literally meaning ‘shut up’ (Kariuki). The other term, *mundu wa nja*, literally means ‘person of the outside’ or ‘person of the courtyard’ (Brinkman 1996: 65). Interestingly, Kariuki suggests that the word *tumia* means ‘to use’. This meaning, which I have not previously encountered in Kikuyu lexicon, may have been borrowed from the Swahili language, whose identical equivalent means the same (Online Swahili-English Dictionary 2006).

These linguistic cues show that men are the dominant gender in Kikuyu society. They are the benchmark by which desirable qualities are determined; bravery is the most desirable of traits, and its equation to “maleness” implies that it is something women would be incapable of. The man is considered the owner of the home, and is the law in his own home; in a typical Kikuyu homestead, when a visitor arrives he may announce himself by calling out, “Mwene mucii!”, referring to the man of the house. Should he encounter the homeowner’s wife instead of the man himself, he may enquire:

“Mwene mucii eku?” (Where is the owner of the home?)

In contrast, women are always on the outside looking in, not to be included in anything important; the term *mundu wa nja* originates from the fact that a married woman comes from outside her husband’s clan; a stranger who can never be trusted (Brinkman 1996: 65). This explains why vital issues such as lawmaking and judging of legal cases such as land and marriage issues were traditionally handled by the men while the women were relegated to childbearing and housekeeping. This still continues today, to some degree. It is further implied that the women exist simply for the men’s convenience and use, and that they are
supposed to defer to the men. They are supposed to be silent and submissive in the presence of their fathers, male relatives and husbands. They are usually not permitted to speak out of turn, and for the most part must keep silent unless they are spoken to, hence the term *mutumia*.

5.3 Swearing and taboo language

Among the Kikuyu there are certain words and utterances that are considered taboo; that is, it is considered improper to utter them. Kikuyu taboo words are taken from such areas as reproduction and bodily parts and functions. They include words like *muthuru* and *kiino*, meaning ‘women’s underwear’ and ‘female genitals’ respectively. Another example is *thica*, meaning ‘have sex’. Kikuyu men are much freer to utter these words and use them in conversation than women are, even though a large portion of these swear words refers to female body parts. Also, when a man is talking to a woman or a boy to a girl, the male may say these words to the female, but the female may not say them back.

The explanation for this is that swearing among Kikuyu males is considered a show of toughness and a source of solidarity. Among women it is a sign of insolence and lack of self-respect and respect for their elders. It also implies loose moral standards. Upon initiation into adulthood, Kikuyu boys receive the privilege of being able to “officially” use swear words while girls, as a sign that they are mature women, are expected to eschew such language completely. A woman known to use taboo language may be shunned by her peers and, in Kikuyu societies of old, would have had no success in securing a suitor.

A particularly sensitive taboo word in Kikuyu is the term *kihii*, which literally means ‘uncircumcised boy or man’ (SlangSite.com 2006). In Kikuyu society, circumcision is the single most important process in the transition from boyhood to manhood; it denotes adulthood. For this reason a *kihii* is still considered a child, and the term can be used as an
insult towards someone who is still uncircumcised or a grown man who acts in a cowardly or childish manner. Consider this hypothetical example:

Ucio tigana nake, aruire tene no no kihii
(Leave him alone, he got circumcised a long time ago but he is still a kihii).

Thus, it was and is forbidden for girls and women to use this term in conversation with boys or men. It is the ultimate male insult, and a woman is not supposed to insult or negatively indict a man’s character. Circumcised boys do, of course, use it as a term of insult or challenge with one another, but coming from a girl it is particularly insulting; the boy thus insulted would suffer extra humiliation if he let the girl in question get away with it.

5.4 Marriage traditions

Among the Kikuyu marriage is a highly valued tradition, seen as a step in the journey from birth, through childhood to adulthood and eventual death. A man is not really considered a man until he has acquired a wife; he may then be known as muthuuri, a ‘decided man’ (Brinkman 1996: 65).

5.4.1 Marriage negotiations

Marriage negotiations involve mostly the senior male members of the girl’s and prospective suitor’s families; traditionally it would be between the male elders of the two clans- mbari- involved (Brinkman 1996: 65). The bride price, ruracio (Kariuki), paid by the suitor’s family to the girl’s family, is decided in the course of these negotiations. It is a process which calls on the verbal skills of the parties involved; the one most able to use language to impress the others will usually carry the day. For instance, the prospective suitor may try to impress the bride’s family by using proverbs and wise sayings in his speech, to show his command of the language and his grasp on vital issues. To show that he intends to
continue the relationship between the two families, and would value their full cooperation in
the wedding effort, he may say:

Kamuingi koyaga ndiri – ‘many hands make light work’ or
Tikumuiya ndiramuiya, no wanyu-literally ‘I am not stealing her, she is still yours’.

This second example implies that even though the bride will find a home away from her
family, her ties with them will remain.

The prospective bride is not involved in the discussion; traditionally she was not
even allowed to be in the room. If in the room she is supposed to keep silent during the
negotiations. In any case, being summoned into a room where all the men of the two families
were gathered would usually create an intimidating atmosphere that would discourage her
from speaking her mind (Brinkman 1996: 63).

5.4.2 Marital conversations

In marriage the inherent inequality between husband and wife is encoded in the
terms *mundu wa nja* (the wife) and *mwene mucii* (the husband) discussed above. These words
suggest a relationship in which the man is dominant and the wife submissive. A good wife
obeys and respects her husband (Brinkman 1996: 65); showing respect includes taking orders
from the husband and not talking back or starting quarrels, behaviour considered foolish and
rude. Vocally disagreeing with her husband’s decisions or not following instructions is
considered an attempt to subvert the man’s authority—to “wear the trousers” in the home.
Consider the example below:

And now the woman has become a man! The man tells his wife, “Warm water, so that I
may wash myself!” “I will not warm it!” And she doesn’t warm the water! ...She just
picks up the wallet and leaves!

(Brinkman 1996: 68)
In contemporary Kikuyu society contradicting the man verbally is still considered unwise; men are generally reluctant about giving women freedom of expression, maintaining that they are untrustworthy:

A woman should keep quiet and be given directives. You should never give a woman freedom...when they are given freedom they eventually throw out their husbands. You cannot try to see if a snake will bite you. A woman is like that snake that can poison you…

(Brinkman 1996: 72)

Thus, in marital relationships women are supposed to be demure and submissive in their use of language towards men, while men use language as a means of establishing authority over women. Should the man feel his wife is trying to take too much control he may admonish her thus:

Watuikire niwe uriathanaga guku? Ati riu niwe mwene mucii?
(Have you become the ruler in this home? Now you are the owner of the house/the man?)

Upon further argument from her he may interject:

Tumia! Mutumia tawe uui ki?
(Be quiet! A woman like you, what do you know?)

At this point the woman would be required to speak no further, but accept her husband’s authority and say no more on the subject.

5.4.3 Settling of marital disputes

Among the Kikuyu emphasis is laid on marital disputes being solved inside the home, with as little outside interference as possible. The saying cia mucii ti como, meaning that affairs of the home should never be discussed in public (Wikiquote 2006), reflects this. Thus it is preferable for Kikuyu husbands and wives to solve their disputes diplomatically within the home. Unfortunately, the men are less disposed to negotiate verbally than the
women are; they might view it as giving up previously-established authority and, according to Brinkman (1996: 75), as an erosion of their masculinity. This speaks of male fear of female domination among the Kikuyu, which may bring ridicule upon the man perceived as unable to “rule” his wife:

Thus men fear the stigma that they are being ordered around by their wives…who would be the mwene mucii if there were two men in the house? (Brinkman 1996: 75)

This perceived stigma is perhaps best illustrated by an incident that occurred on the evening of May 3rd 2005 in Nairobi, Kenya’s capital city. The Kenyan First Lady, Lucy Kibaki, paid a surprise visit to the offices of the Nation Centre-headquarters of the Daily Nation newspaper-to protest unfair media coverage of herself by the same newspaper (Daily Nation 2005). Of the various people who lent their opinion on the matter, various Kikuyu men and women felt that the First Lady had overstepped her bounds as a wife, and that her husband, President Mwai Kibaki, should have done more to “curb” her behaviour. Columnist Betty Caplan, in the same paper, stated that “there seems to be a fairly universal taboo on women speaking out of turn unless they have been given explicit permission to do so” (Caplan 2005). This is especially true in the Kikuyu situation.

Thus, Kikuyu men are more likely to use harsh, forceful and commanding language such as Tumia! or Kira! (shut up!) when disagreements arise, while women are more likely to use diplomatic language. The men are more likely to resort to violence to solve disputes than women are. Attempts by the man to end the argument sometimes may include a statement like:

Ndirona no mbaara ureenda! (I can see it is only war you want!)
According to Brinkman (1996: 75), men “in the past, as well as the present, had only one way of showing their anger and never bothered to try a language other than force.” Sometimes diplomatic intervention did occur:

> When disagreements came up between the husband and me, people in the homestead, especially his father and mother, would bring us together to talk.
> (Brinkman 1996: 75)

### 5.5 Influences on Kenyan English

Certain aspects of the Kikuyu language have tended to spill over into Kenyan English, influencing the way it is spoken by men and women and lending some words to it. Having the largest population in Kenya, the Kikuyu community has the biggest number of native speakers; thus, it has considerably more influence on Kenyan English than other indigenous languages.

A major influence is in the use of swearing and taboo words. A significant number of Kikuyu swear terms have made it into informal English speech, notably the term *kihii*. In Kenyan English this word serves the same purpose as it does in Kikuyu. It can be used to disparage a man who is uncircumcised, and also to refer to a perceived coward:

> He saw a cop and ran away. But he got caught, started crying, and ratted us out big time. He's nothing but a Kehee!
> (SlangSite.com 2006)

It can also, as in Kikuyu, be used to insult one and challenge their manhood and bravery. But, as in Kikuyu, it is mainly used in conversation between men and boys, and it is still considered highly inappropriate for girls and women to use it in speech.

Male attitude towards women among the Kikuyu may also manifest itself when Kikuyu men speak English. In discussions between men a woman’s opinion or feeling regarding a certain matter may be disparaged thus:
*Aaai*, she is only a woman, she knows nothing! (*Aaai* is a Kikuyu term, used to show contempt, frequently used in English)

The term *Aaai*, as used above, has also made it into English speech, and serves the same purpose as it does in Kikuyu. It is also pronounced in the same long, drawn-out fashion in both languages, starting with a low voice pitch and ending with a high one. There is no particular equivalent English term. In Kikuyu male-female conversation this term could be used more freely by men than by women; this usage has passed into English speech.

There is also a form of semantic borrowing; the very words “man” and “woman” may be taken to explicitly show male superiority, following the Kikuyu example of encoding gender attitudes directly in the meanings of *mundu murume* and *mutumia*: bravery versus submission. Thus, though the language spoken might be English, referring to a woman as such may be taken to imply her inferiority to a man. To illustrate, I once had a conversation with a Kikuyu friend, Njoki, in which she related how she had stood up to a male bully who had been harassing her in school. The episode escalated into a physical confrontation, which Njoki won. The school she attended at the time had a strict English-only policy; no other language could be spoken by the students. Upon her victory several students exclaimed, “Njoki you are a man!”

This points to the fact that physical domination is considered a male preserve among the Kikuyu, and that Kikuyu boys and girls are brought up to see it this way. The school Njoki attended had a predominantly Kikuyu student population. The students who witnessed the fight were merely expressing an opinion ingrained into their psyches.

6. **Conclusion**

To conclude, this study has tried to show how male dominance over women among the Kikuyu is manifested in their use of language, and how this may spill over into Kenyan English. While not an exhaustive study, it does illustrate how women’s inferior status
in Kikuyu society is linguistically manifested. It should, however, be noted that as time goes by and gender issues are highlighted more, Kikuyu women - and Kenyan women as a whole - are becoming more aware of their rights and are asserting their independence more. They are seeking the right to be recognized as equal to men in all matters, and gender bias is slowly becoming the exception rather than the rule. Kikuyu men are less likely to use language prejudiced against women than they were in the past, and Kikuyu women are acquiring more freedom of verbal expression without fear of reprisals by the men.
List of references


Appendix

List of Kikuyu terms used, with definitions

Aaai a Kikuyu expletive used to dismiss or trivialize something; pronounced in a long drawn-out fashion. Commonly used in English and other languages as well

cia mucii ti como matters of the home are not for public discussion; used to warn one not to wash their dirty linen in public

eku? Kikuyu interrogative word meaning “where?” used to inquire about one’s whereabouts

kihii/ kehee Kikuyu word meaning uncircumcised man or boy. Also used as a term of insult, challenge or derogatory reference

kiino word referring to the female private parts

kira be quiet

mundu wa nja person of the outside; a term used to refer to women

mundu murume Kikuyu term for a man

mundurume a shortened form of mundu murume

muthuru word referring to female underclothing

muthuuri a man who has married

mutumia Kikuyu term for a woman

mwene mucii owner of the house; usually refers to the man

ruracio bride price paid by a man to his future wife’s family

thica taboo word meaning to have sex

tumia shut up; be quiet