

# Men versus 'Real men'; The Discursive Construction of Masculinity on Kenyan FM radio - Classic 105

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## **Abstract**

*The media plays a pivotal role in the Patriarchal ideologies gender roles and norms continue to be propagated through images presented in the mass media in both overt and subtle ways despite efforts being made towards fighting gender discrimination and stereotyping. The study sought to establish how masculinity is constructed in talk show discourse by analysing the language used by participants in the show and the underlying ideology that influences lexical choice. Critical Discourse Analysis was used both as theory and as a tool for the analysis of discourse. This study revealed ways in which what seems as normal every day language.*

**Key words:** C.D.A., Gender, Hegemonic masculinity, Media, Talk show

## **I. Introduction**

This paper looks into the construction of masculinity in talk show discourse. The focus is on how language is used in subtle ways to propagate gender ideologies that underlie the notion of hegemonic masculinity. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) serves as a lens through which all this can be uncovered

Language has and always will be an important part of culture and socialization because it is through language that belief systems and ideologies are transmitted<sup>i</sup>

Interest in the field of language and gender over the past four decades has led to the discovery of the important role played by language in the reproduction and sustenance of hegemonic social relations and identities<sup>ii, iii</sup>.

Studies have shown that despite advancements in the push for gender equity, discrimination still persists in how individuals are viewed from the perspective of their gendered identities and roles. Research has shown

how the female gender has been objectified and oppressed through images and arguments used to portray women and girls in the mass media<sup>iv</sup>. Hegemonic patriarchal ideology continues to be propagated and enforced in an era that boasts gender parity and equal rights and privileges of all in every facet of social life<sup>v</sup>. How hegemonic patriarchal ideologies continue to be propagated in the construction of masculinity through the media needs to be investigated.

Hegemonic norms of masculinity within the African context as well as many societies in the world are heavily stereotypical, with culturally idealized norms of manhood that are socially and hierarchically exclusive. Emphasis is placed on physical strength and body size, virility, economic power and the ability to amass and maintain wealth including livestock, women and children. This is often displayed in acts of brutality, violence, and pseudo natural toughness<sup>vi</sup>. One's ability to meet these set norms determines whether one is tagged as a 'real man' or not. Hegemony in masculinity therefore refers not just to practices that promote the dominant social position of men and subordination of women, but also in relation to other subordinated masculinities as well.<sup>vii</sup>

The erosion of traditional structures and the influence of education, religion and modernization and the entry of women into the formal workplace have impacted ways of thought and value systems. These are factors that have led to changes in the dynamics of gender relations and gender role expectations.

The mass media however makes hegemonic masculinity very visible to the public eye. The very same media has immense power and can be used as an avenue for the creation of awareness on human rights and freedoms. Due to their unique interactive nature, talk shows provide a forum for the construction and negotiation of gender roles within the social space

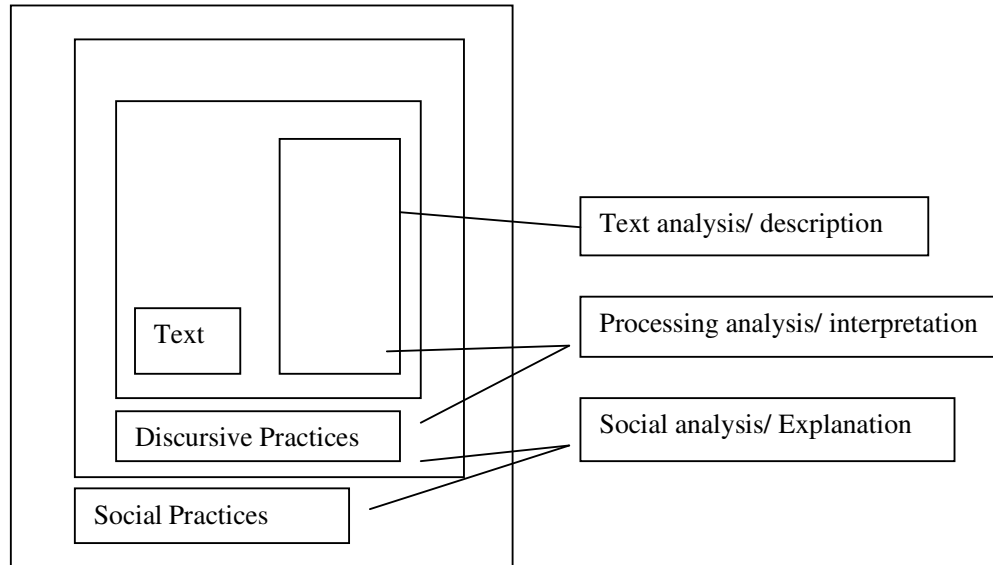
As hypothesized by CDA, it would therefore be expected that individuals would argue against oppressive hegemonic stereotypes, constructing more liberal, realistic identities for themselves. On the contrary, hegemonic stereotypes still persist. It is not necessarily what men who are in power are, but rather what sustains their power and what they support.<sup>viii</sup>

This research therefore sought to establish how hegemonic masculinity is constructed in talk show discourse by analysing features of language used by participants and the underlying ideology with which they are infused. It is hoped that the data collected and findings will add to knowledge and contribute to ongoing discussions on language, gender and discrimination, as well as shed light on the talk show as a genre of media discourse.

## **II. Literature review**

Language is an important component of social life, a means through which cultural belief systems and attitudes are perpetuated and transmitted. As proposed by CDA, dialectical relationship exists between language and social structure, systems and ideology in that, language not only shapes, but is also in turn shaped by social structure.<sup>ix</sup>

Norman Fairclough explains this interrelatedness using three levels of analysis illustrated in the figure below

**Figure 2.1: The three dimensional model of discourse**

**Source: Janks, (1997:26)**

When writing or speaking, we unconsciously reveal our attitudes, beliefs and social background<sup>x</sup>. Any research on identity construction therefore must look into these ideas, beliefs and memories that are all products of mental activity.<sup>xi</sup> Ideologies are therefore to be seen as social in nature, based on often deep rooted belief systems and although often covert in nature, have far reaching consequences<sup>xii</sup>

Gender is a social construct; the sense of self and others as being male or female, and is enacted through gender roles. Individuals are not passive in this process of construction, rather are actively involved in not only constituting their own identities, but those of others as well.<sup>xiii</sup>

In a world where individuals are required to juggle different, often contradictory social roles,<sup>xiv</sup> the task of learning what it means to be male or female in today's society can prove to be a daunting task.

Hegemony involves persuasion of the greater part of the population, particularly through the media to view the organisation of social institutions in ways that appear natural, ordinary and normal<sup>xv</sup>. Culturally idealised forms of masculine character however may not be the 'usual form of masculinity at all' rather its exaltation is mainly used to stabilize a structure of dominance and oppression in the gender order as a whole.<sup>xvi</sup> The fact is that these celebrated bearers of hegemonic ideals of masculinity; sports personalities, high flying politicians and business icons are rarely up to the task.

The media wields enormous power by displaying images of ideal femininity and masculinity, images that are often very narrow and stereotypical.<sup>xvii</sup> Extensive exposure to these images, especially among today's youth, for whom the media offers more opportunities to examine gender roles than they get in real life, results in a society inclined to accept discriminatory roles and stereotypes.<sup>xviii</sup>

The media in Kenya plays an increasingly important role in the dissemination of information. With an increase in urban population and corresponding breakdown of traditional social structure, the media plays an increasingly important and influential role as a medium for the socialization of today's youth. Recent studies have shown that radio reaches upwards of 80% of the Kenyan population<sup>xix</sup> with even the rural population being able to access fm radio via their mobile phones<sup>xx</sup>.

Talk shows are the latest media craze in Kenya, both on TV and Fm radio, with most stations hosting at least 2 interactive shows each week day. A ready target audience for talk radio presents itself in the section of Kenyans who spend hours in traffic commuting to and from work and college by public or private means.

The show under study is one such show targeted at ‘entertaining’ the urban population in the morning. It was voted the most listened to show in Nairobi between 7am and 10am.<sup>xxi</sup>

### III. Methodology

The research took a case study approach by looking in depth into one radio talk show. Purposive sampling of recorded episodes of the show was done to narrow down to those that best portrayed the features being looked for as well as those that covered the topics of interest to the study. Secondary data therefore consisted of recordings of the discussions aired during the show; translated where necessary and transcribed orthographically for textual analysis.

Primary data was collected from recordings of a Focus Group discussion composed of listeners of the show selected from a local university. Focus Groups have been found to be very useful in qualitative research due to the opportunity they provide for the clarification, extension and qualification of data collected through other methods<sup>xxii</sup> The 12 respondents that composed the Focus Group provided data that helped corroborate the findings made from the recorded episodes.

### IV. Discussion of findings

The study set out to describe how masculinity is constructed in talk show discourse by analysing the linguistic features used. This section is a discussion of the findings made on analysis of the data collected.

#### 4.1 Lexical choice in the construction of masculinity

The objective of this study was to describe how masculinity is constructed in talk show discourse by analysing the linguistic features used in the show under study. Lexical choice refers to the selection of specific words out of those at the disposal of the speaker that accurately express the content of what is to be communicated. These choices represent the intentions and attitudes of the speaker<sup>xxiii</sup>. In this study, speakers have used specific words to construct themselves or others in a particular light. These linguistic features convey to the listener their attitudes as well as the underlying ideologies that influence what is said and its interpretation by the listener. The following features were prevalent discussed.

##### 4.1.1 Noun modifiers

Modifiers are used in the description of nouns and other substantives by qualifying and quantifying them. Deliberate, albeit subconscious choice of adjectives with which gender norms are described determine how these are processed and interpreted by the listeners as seen in this study.

By African ideals, a man worth his salt was of necessity ‘virile and sexually potent’<sup>xxiv</sup>. In a discussion on why men fail to meet their wives conjugal needs, there is constant use of the pre-modifier ‘**real**’ before the noun ‘**men**’ when referring to men who are able to meet their women’s sexual needs. On the contrary, men who do not meet this hegemonic ideal are referred to as ‘**idiots**’.

The speaker constantly disassociates himself with men who by stereotypical ideals fall short by referring to them as ‘*tu-vijana wa siku hizi*’. The prefix ‘*tu-*’ in reference to a noun ‘*vijana*’ (*Swahili for youth*) denotes inferiority or lack of significance and can be construed as derogatory. In essence therefore, the speaker’s reference to such men as ‘boys of these days’ brings out his view that ‘today’s’ men do not measure up to the traditional standards of masculinity and therefore do not even qualify to be called ‘real men’. He gives the example of being able to possess and meet the needs of up to even three women as one such standard.

Images of men as tough rugged creatures abound in the media. With men who are seen as being too keen to look and smell nice being portrayed as ‘feminine’. Discussions on the metro sexual man revealed such

stereotypical images. 'Real men' were described as being '**wild**' needing to look '**bad**' or '**rough**'. As one speaker put it 'a man should look bad... rough... ' men are supposed to look like men'.

#### 4.1.2 Metaphor

Metaphor is another lexical item used in the construction of masculinity in the show. Through the use of metaphor and other forms of figurative language, participants in the show are able to construct their identities in ways that expose the underlying systems of thought. Metaphors used in the show mostly comprised terms borrowed from ones native language, Swahili or slang but whose common idiomatic use across Kenyan cultures make them understandable to the urban Kenyan audience. Metaphors embody both a euphemistic function of 'masking' taboo words and expressions as well as being transmitters of ideology. There was constant reference to 'real men' as being **animals**, or **wild animals**. Men who failed to meet this ideal were accused of 'imitating ladies'.

The 'cock' and 'bull' are common symbols of masculinity across Kenya and Africa as a whole<sup>xxv</sup> a speaker accused of not being man enough or '**Ndume**' (*Swahili for bull*) is advised to hand over his woman to other men and stop being an embarrassment to 'real men'

#### 4.1.3 Euphemism

Euphemism is commonly used as a strategy to deny or obscure relations of domination. By euphemising terms that are deemed negative or offensive, one is essentially portraying them in a more positive light. In this study, euphemism is used extensively in relation to promiscuity. In a country (Kenya) that is claimed to be over 80 percent Christian, it is ironical that the 'real man' is still being constructed as ideally promiscuous and/ or polygamous. Infidelity is referred to as '**kuruka ruka**' (*Swahili meaning jumping here and there*), '**having women**' or '**mpango wa kando**' (*Swahili for plan B*) . Men who were monogamous were scoffed at, and the Swahili term '**wamekaliwa**' used in reference to them. This translated directly means 'they have been sat on' and therefore have no say in their households.

It was also found that masculinity was pegged on ones ability to perform sexually. Impotence was unspeakable and was equated to uselessness. Men with any form of dysfunction in this area were dismissed as being '**not of any use**' to their partners or society, regardless of their achievement in other spheres of life.

#### 4.1.4 Pronouns

Lastly, pronouns have been used to categorize masculinities, with speakers identifying themselves with what they consider 'ideal' while disassociating themselves with 'deficient' traits as far as masculinity is concerned.

Pronouns used in the construction of masculinity were grouped into two. The first person plural forms were used for inclusivity. They unified people and actions that seemed to meet the prescribed ideals of 'real manhood' thus constructing a collective identity. Pronouns in the third person, were used to disassociate those that are 'in' from the 'others', the 'real men' from the rest of the pack.

First person pronouns	Third person pronouns
we	They
us	Those
	Them

Source: Research data 2013

## V. Conclusion

From the findings, it is evident that the media has taken over an important and influential role in...

The talk show provides an important forum for the discursive construction of gender, and specifically masculinity

Language is instrumental in the construction of masculinity, and an analysis of linguistic features used by participants in the show reveal how language is infused with gender ideologies

A textual analysis of the data identified four major linguistic categories instrumental in the construction of masculinity. These are; noun modifiers, metaphor, euphemism and pronouns. Each of these were described and discussed. The social contexts in which the excerpts are produced and interpreted are also discussed. This is against the backdrop of socio- historical factors and conditions that influence the narrative of gender relations in the Kenyan, and wider African context

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