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Sociolinguistic perspectives of grammatical gender rigidity and flexibility in Hausa dialects

Abdulwaheed Shuaibu

Department of Linguistics and African Languages, Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo, Nigeria,
princidebayo11@gmail.com ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-8735-6382>

Correspondence: princidebayo11@gmail.com

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Abstract: This paper discusses the aspect of gender distinction in three large Hausa dialects – Sokoto Hausa (Sakkwatanci), Zaria Hausa (Zazzaganci) and Kano Hausa (Kananci). Though Hausa is one of the few African languages with a well-developed system of gender manifested in the pronouns, verbs, copulas, and morphology of nominals, even within the dialects, the regularity with which these differences are observed varies considerably. The analysis employs the comparative methodology based on data on natural conversations, elicitation tasks, and media texts directed by the variationist sociolinguistic framework and findings in the language-and-gender studies. The results indicate that Sakkwatanci maintains gender marking strictly, which supports the idea of being linguistically conservative and socially prestigious. Instead, Zazzaganci often defeminizes gender, and he creates forms like 'matata ne' rather than 'matata ce', which is conditioned by the forces of urban informality and contacts. There is biased upkeep in Kananci: gender marking is used in formal situations but simplified in colloquial language, particularly in the Kannywood movies and in colloquial urban speech. Generally, this paper suggests that the trends in gender usage are replicas of bigger sociolinguistic events of identity, prestige, and language change. The implication on Hausa standardisation, media practice, and language education, and the study suggests that more research could be done on the cultural forces that influence the variation in grammar.

Keywords: Dialect identity, Gender distinction, Hausa dialects, Language change, Sociolinguistic variation

1. Introduction

It is commonly held that Hausa is one of the few African languages to have a stable, developed system of grammatical gender, an attribute it shares with few other Niger-Congo languages, which have systems of noun classes but which tend to be more semantically general and less sexual in nature (Jaggar, 2006). Being a branch of the Afro-Asiatic family, Hausa has a binary gender opposition, i.e., masculine and feminine, which is apparent in its pronominal system, the verbal morphology, demonstratives, and, in most instances, adjectival agreement. Such a gender system fulfils not only a grammatical role but also sociolinguistic actions of identity, politeness, and dialectal deviation.

Gender in Hausa, according to scholars such as Paul Newman (1979, 2000), is morphologically salient, especially in the derivational feminine markers. A possible solution is to fix the words with the suffixes '-a' and '-iya', which form feminine forms systematically. A case in point is that 'malam' (male teacher) is translated to 'malama' (female teacher) and 'bawa' (male slave) is translated to 'baiwa' (female slave). According to Newman in his book Explaining Hausa Feminines (1979), these derivational patterns are not only markers of inherited Afro-Asiatic grammatical patterns but also

Hausa novelties. Regular suffixation is, however, not developed by all genders (contrast of). There are also lexicalised or suppletive forms of Hausa, e.g., 'sarki' (king) and 'sarauniya' (queen): the feminine form is not constructed by simple morphological extension but by the other lexical morpheme. Therefore, the writing by Newman elaborates that Hausa gender derivations are not arbitrary, but they are morphologically justified and also allow irregular historical developments dictated by semantic difference and social roles.

A possible example of the most apparent observation of gender differences is Hausa pronouns. According to Jaggar (2001), the differences of the second person and the third person singular are *kai* (you, masculine) vs. *ke* (you, feminine) and *shi* (he) vs. *ita* (she). These pronouns arouse gender-sensitive consensus on the verbs. The masculine subject in the third person may be indicated in the perfective form with 'yaa' (*yaa zo* – "he came") and the female subject with 'taa' (*taa zo* – "she came"). These are not morphological contrasts but carry an agreement that extends to the clause, to the auxiliary particles and, in certain instances, to the object pronouns (Newman, 2000; Jaggar, 2006).

The differences of gender are also observed in adjectives and nominal modifiers. According to Galadanci, the adjectives are often suffixally modified to indicate feminine forms (1976, cited in spite of later works): typically through *-a*, *-iya* or *-uwa*. As an example, 'gajere' (short, masculine) is changed to 'gajera' (small, feminine), whereas 'karami' (small, masculine) becomes 'karama' (small, feminine). These trends are similar to those of noun derivation and emphasise the ubiquity of gender as a grammatical category. Simultaneously, there are adjectives that are resistant to changes, particularly in contemporary colloquial languages, which imply constant simplification schemes (Britanica, 2024). This moral conflict between the strictness of morphology and the colloquialism of flexibility is the prelude to the dialectal problems which are the subject of this research.

Gender in Hausa is in interaction with semantics and pragmatics, in addition to morphology. This is because the lexical root can have different meanings, as shown by Pawlak and McIntyre (2014), based on the gender marking. As an example, 'kwallo' as a masculine word may refer to pith or nut, and the feminine 'kwallo' refers to ball. These contrasts demonstrate that gender is not merely an ornament of grammar but may vary in referential meaning in such a way that they indicate the cultural and cognitive categorisations. This has been attributed to wider Afro-Asiatic gender-assigning trends where natural sex differentiations tend to be metaphorically applied to the semantic realms (Caron, 1991).

Notably, the gender system in Hausa is not universal between different dialects. The Sokoto dialect (*Sakkwatanci*) is characterised by strict adherence to gender differences, as the people of this community do not violate the norms of the language in both formal and informal communication. *Zazzaganci* (Zaria dialect), on the other hand, often bleaches gender markers so that masculine forms are used in a generalised fashion, wherein, in Standard Hausa, gender would be necessary. As a socio-political dialect in the most dominant position because of the role of Kano in commerce and media, *Kananci* (Kano dialect) is an intermediary case: the gender differences are preserved, but there are significant simplifications. Such dialectal variations make Hausa a perfect study area in the context of determinations of how grammatical categories can be preserved and eroded with the changing sociolinguistic background.

Consequently, gender analysis in Hausa gives a good understanding of the three intertwined aspects: (i) the structural richness of Afro-Asiatic gender marking, (ii) the sociolinguistic pressures operating in the development of dialects, and (iii) the cultural connotations that Hausa people attribute to gender in their day-to-day conversations. This paper is devoted to these dialectal processes and compares the inflexibility of *Sakkwatanci* to the flexibility of *Zazzaganci* and *Kananci* and puts this variation into the context of the sociolinguistic theory and Hausa linguistic identity.

1.1. Problem statement

Hausa is famed due to its methodical grammatical system of gender, but the usage of dialects displays unequal maintenance of the differences. Sokoto Hausa (*Sakkwatanci*) is still gender marked with very high consistency, whereas Zaria Hausa (*Zazzaganci*) neutralises it, often substituting feminine with masculine formations. Kano Hausa (*Kananci*) is in-between, and there is gender being observed in the formal registers, but reduced in the daily speech used in the urban areas. This variation brings up linguistic and sociolinguistic issues: it undermines the belief in standardisation in Hausa grammars

and makes the quest for standardisation, schooling, and the media more difficult. Nevertheless, limited literature explicitly investigated how and why Hausa dialects differ in their gender treatment, and this research manages to fill this gap.

1.2. Contrast

The dialect Sokoto (Sakkwatanci) is also very strict, and the speakers are very keen on maintaining the gender difference in pronouns, verbs, and modifiers. Speakers, as an example, can always tell the difference between 'yaa zo' (he came) and 'taa zo' (she came) or 'kai' (you, masculine) and 'ke' (you, feminine), even in a casual conversation. Such strict adherence is usually seen as an embodiment of linguistic conservatism, in addition to cultural prestige.

In comparison, the Zaria language (Zazzaganci) also tends towards gender neutrality, the neutral forms being the masculine forms of words in the vernacular. As an illustration, speakers may also tend to use the 'yaa zo' form with either a male or female referent or use the default 'kai' as a general form of 'you', irrespective of gender. The Kano dialect (Kananci) lies between the two extremes: although the Kano dialect still has gender distinctions in most of the cases, there is a certain tendency toward simplification, particularly in urban language and the media.

This difference in dialects brings out a critical sociolinguistic problem: is Hausa gender marking a fixed grammatical property of varieties or a variable, bargaining system of gender based on regional identity, social interaction, and language change?

1.3. Research questions

This research is informed by the following questions:

- i. What is the difference between Hausa dialects, namely Sokoto (Sakkwatanci), Zaria (Zazzaganci), and Kano (Kananci), on the issue of grammatical gender, especially the use of pronouns, verbs, and modifiers?
- ii. What sociolinguistic influences, e.g., regional identity, prestige, urbanisation, and education contact, explain these dialectal differences in gender marking?

1.4. Significance of the Study

This research is important because it will contribute to both applied sociolinguistics and theoretical linguistics. The analysis of the dialect-specific differences in gender use helps the work to illuminate the phenomenon of how a seemingly stable grammatical category can vary and change within the pressures of the sociolinguistic environment. It has significant consequences in three aspects:

- i. **Language Change and Variation:** It will give us some idea of the processes of grammatical erosion and conservatism in Hausa, and it will provide a small-scale demonstration of how languages change within themselves but still share a common structure.
- ii. **Identity and Prestige:** The discord of strictness in Sakkwatanci and the accommodation of both Zazzaganci and Kananci show how dialects are used to identify oneself and negotiate prestige in Hausa-speaking communities.
- iii. **Standardisation and Education:** These dialectal oppositions are important in educational policy and the standardisation of Hausa language and media practices, particularly in light of Kano station being the heart of broadcasting and cultural production.

Overall, the paper not only enhances our perception of gender in Hausa linguistics but also adds to the wider debate of how social influences mediate grammatical systems of African languages.

2. Literature review

2.1. Hausa gender system overview

The Hausa grammar system has a solid gender system, especially in the pronominal, verbal, and adjectival spheres. According to Newman (2000), gender differences are evident in almost all the patterns of agreement. For example:

1. Pronouns

- a. *shi yaa zo* – “he came” (masculine)
- b. *ita taa zo* – “she came” (feminine)

2. Verbs

Gender is marked by prefixes of subject agreement in the verbs. As Jaggar (2001) illustrates:

- a. *yaa ci abinci* – "He ate food."
- b. *taa ci abinci* – "She ate food"

3. Demonstratives and adjectives

Gender agreement is also evident in adjectives and demonstratives (Frajzyngier, 1997):

- a. *wannan yaro kyakkyawa* – "this handsome boy" (masculine)
- b. *waccan yarinya kyakkyawa* – "that beautiful girl" (feminine)

These instances, as Heine and Nurse (2000) point out, show that the Hausa morphosyntax is highly gendered, as opposed to many other African languages, like the Yoruba, which do not have grammatical gender.

2.2. Hausa dialectology and gender

Hausa has a two-way gender system, masculine and feminine, which is actualised in the form of nouns, pronouns, adjectives, demonstratives and subject-verb agreement (Newman, 2000; Caron, 2011). Gender differences in Standard Hausa, especially in the prestige varieties of Kano/Daura, are mandatory in subject-verb agreement. Masculine objects arouse *you*, and feminine objects arouse *too*:

- a. *Yaro ya tafi* – "The boy went."
- b. *Yarinya ta tafi* – "The girl went."

Evidence of dialects, however, reveals that such differences are not maintained uniformly across Hausa-speaking areas. According to Bagari (1982), Sokoto Hausa (Sakkwatanci) is very conservative in gender marking, and this is where a speaker will always observe the *ya/ta* agreement. The Sokoto dialect also has a very unique feature with regard to nominal predication; it has more preference towards the forms analytic markers *matata ta* (she is my wife) and *mijina na* (he is my husband) rather than the standard forms *matata ce* and *mijina ne*, respectively (cf. Jaggar, 2001). This characteristic points to the further conservatism of the dialect and its systematic internal diversity.

In comparison, gender in verb agreement is often neutralised by Zaria Hausa (Zazzaganci). The common phenomenon of the masculine stabiliser, with the masculine marker '*ya*' generalised even to feminine subjects, is an empirical report by Kubanni, ABU Zaria; Newman (1991):

- a. *Yarinya ya tafi* – "The girl went."
- b. *Kanwata ya sayi littafi* – "My younger sister bought a book."
- c. *Uwa ya dawo* – "The mother returned."

More importantly, the opposite construction, that is, feminine '*ta*' and masculine subject ('*yaro ta tafi*'), is extremely uncharacteristic and, as a rule, is regarded as non-grammatical, as a manifestation of an unequal neutralisation, when the masculine form is the default.

Kano Hausa (Kananci) is situated in the middle. According to Jaggar (2001), educated speakers of the Kano language are likely to maintain the gender difference in the formal registers; however, in these instances, the gender-neutral forms appear with the use of informal speech, in particular, in the young speakers:

- a. *Yaa zo* - applies to both male and female subjects, even though *taa zo* is the canonical feminine form.

This dialectal continuum thus represents a scale: Sokoto Hausa is conservative, Zaria Hausa is innovative, and Kano Hausa is hybrid.

2.3. Gender and language differences in African sociolinguistics

As sociolinguistic studies of African nations show, such grammatical categories as gender are not a linguistic category only, but also a reflection of social identity and ideology. Labov (1972) explained the systematic preferences in gender marking in the different Hausa dialects in the theory of socially conditioned variation. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2013) went further to explain that Hausa preserved gender agreement and Sokoto gender-neutral verb agreement since Hausa had historical religious orthodoxy and traditional authority, whereas Zaria verbs were gender neutral because Hausa was multilingual, informal, and economical in language in the urban centre.

As an example, one can hear among Zaria students:

- a. *Yaa kammala jarabawa* – “He/she finished the exam”

Where gender is not mentioned, as for feminine referents, the opposite of the prescriptive *taa kammala jarabawa*. However, in Sokoto, it is almost entirely the case that educated speakers in formal speech maintain the distinction, which upholds prestige norms.

Conservatism of dialect is also apparent in the Sokoto nominal predication (e.g., '*matata ta*', '*mijina na*') in opposition to the standard ('*matata ce*', '*mijina ne*'). This is in line with an observation made by Caron (2011) that Hausa dialects tend to vary in the way they use copulas, which is both grammatical conservatism and innovation.

Combined, those patterns verify that Hausa dialectology is a fruitful area in terms of studying the interplay between linguistic organisation and sociocultural influences. The fact that Zazzaganci uses the masculine stabiliser, processes of gender neutralisation are stressed; Sokoto Hausa is illustrated with grammatical conservatism; and Kano Hausa is in an intermediate form, which corresponds to the continuum of sociolinguistic variation introduced by Labov.

2.4. Gaps in the literature

Although the Hausa grammar and dialectology have been heavily researched, few studies have been done to specifically compare Hausa dialects in terms of gender rigidity and flexibility. Most of the literature simply makes reference to gender differences, without the examination of how these differences are being redefined by urbanisation, education, and prestige hierarchies. This paper thus fulfils this gap by concentrating on gender as a sociolinguistic variable in Hausa dialects.

2.5. Theoretical framework

This study embraces the variationist sociolinguistics by Labov (1972), which considers the variations in gender-marking dialects as a socially patterned variation. As an illustration, the conservative use of Sokoto Hausa implies prestige values, whereas the neutralisation of Zaria Hausa implies the practice of local identity.

Also, language and gender studies (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2013) provide information regarding the social negotiations of grammatical gender. The use of this framework reveals that Hausa gender differences, although structural, are relative and depend on the dialect, context and identity of the speaker.

3. Methodology

This study uses a comparative sociolinguistic approach to examine how gender differences are perpetuated, undermined, or neutralised in Hausa dialects. The paper is placed in the school of thought known as the variationist tradition (Labov, 1972) that highlights the way linguistic forms fluctuate in a systematic manner based on social and regional influences.

3.1. Research design

It is a comparative design, which compares the Sokoto (Sakkwatanci) dialect, characterised by a high rate of gender marking, to the Zaria (Zazzaganci) dialect and Kano (Kananci) dialect, which, however, exhibit gender neutralisation tendencies. This design allows a methodical search into the issue of whether these tendencies are dialect-specific or social conditioning.

3.2. Data sources

Three supplementary sources of data were employed to obtain natural, varying language use:

- i. Natural conversations: The informal speech was also captured between community members in the marketplaces and family and student interactions and is used to give spontaneous instances of gender usage in normal communication.
- ii. Eliciting tasks: The participants were instructed to create sentences that included some gender differences (e.g., *shi yaa sha ruwa* "he drank water" vs. *ita taa sha ruwa* "she drank water"). Such activities were used to test how gender marking was consistent among dialects.

- iii. Written and cultural texts: Hausa proverbs, popular songs and media scripts were examined to examine the issue of whether gender differentiation is equally applied in more formal or artistic modes of communication.

3.3. Participants

There were 90 speakers in the three dialect areas (30 per site). The purposive sampling technique was applied to ensure diversity in:

- i. Gender (male and female speakers)
- ii. Age (young people 18-30, middle-aged people 31-50, old people 51+), and
- iii. Educational background (non-literate, tertiary-educated, and secondary-level speakers).

The effect of this stratification was that language competence as well as sociolinguistic variation could be sufficiently represented in the data.

3.4. Analytical procedure

Transcription and coding of the recordings was done in terms of gender-marked forms, specifically in terms of pronouns (*shi/ita* “he/she”) and verbs (*yaa/taa*) and adjectives. The frequency counts were done to establish the frequency of the occurrence of gender being strictly followed or neutralised within each dialect. A comparative study was then made on the level of consistency in Sokoto, Zaria and Kano speech.

In order to explain these trends, one focused on social reasons to have variation – whether prestige, urbanisation, or education exposure had any bearing on preserving or eliminating gender differences. Accordingly, the combination of quantitative measures (frequency and distribution of forms) and qualitative information (sociolinguistic motivations) was used as the methodology.

Table 1: Comparative Gender and Copula Usage across Hausa Dialects

Feature	Standard Hausa (Kananci prestige)	Sokoto Hausa (Sakkwatanci)	Kano Hausa (Kananci)	Zaria Hausa (Zazzaganci)
Verb agreement with masculine subject	<i>Yaro ya tafi</i> – “The boy went.”	<i>Yaro ya tafi</i>	<i>Yaro ya tafi</i>	<i>Yaro ya tafi</i>
Verb agreement with feminine subject	<i>Yarinya ta tafi</i> – “The girl went.”	<i>Yarinya ta tafi</i>	<i>Yarinya ta tafi</i> (formal); <i>Yarinya ya tafi</i> (informal)	<i>Yarinya ya tafi</i>
Pronoun distinction	Preserved (<i>shi</i> vs. <i>ita</i>)	Preserved	Preserved	Preserved
Relative pronoun	<i>wanda</i> (masc.), <i>wadda</i> (fem.)	Same as Standard	Same as Standard	Same as Standard
Nominal predication (wife)	<i>Matata ce</i> – “She is my wife.”	<i>Matata ta</i>	<i>Matata ce</i> (formal), <i>Matata ta</i> (colloquial)	<i>Matata ce</i>
Nominal predication (husband)	<i>Mijina ne</i> – “He is my husband.”	<i>Mijina na</i>	<i>Mijina ne</i> (formal), <i>Mijina na</i> (colloquial)	<i>Mijina ne</i>
Tendency in gender usage	Strict gender distinction	Conservative, highly consistent	Hybrid (context-dependent)	Neutralization via masculine stabilizer (<i>ya</i>)
Sociolinguistic value	Prestige associated with education	norm, Orthodoxy, with conservatism, authority	Urban hybridity, youth variation	Innovation, linguistic economy, urban informality

The comparative table shows that Hausa dialects evolve differently in their use of grammatical gender, especially in the subject-verb agreement and the usage of copula. The Standard Hausa (that of the Kano prestige type) is a language that retains the canonical distinction between ‘ya’ and ‘ta’ and thus preserves gender distinctions, but informal urban varieties of Hausa show some tendency to drift towards neutralisation. Sokoto Hausa (Sakkwatanci) is the most conservative profile; speakers always maintain gender agreement and prefer strategies of copular (*matata ta*, *mijina na*), which supports its image of a conservative dialect that is associated with religious and cultural orthodoxy (Bagari, 1982). Zaria Hausa (Zazzaganci) is on the other end of the pole, with systematic neutralisation of feminine agreement (*yarinya ya tafi*) being the outcome of inclinations towards linguistic economy and urban informality. Kano Hausa (Kananci) is in between and can be characterised as showing sociolinguistic stratification whereby educated or formal register adheres to the prestige norm, whereas colloquial speech is more permissive to gender neutralisation. These

differences validate the assumption by Labov (1972) that dialectal variation is both structured and socially conditioned, and they are in line with the argument by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2013) that gender in language is not only grammatical but also social identities and ideologies.

4. Gender applicability in the Sokoto dialect (Sakkwatanci)

4.1. Gender variance in the firm (pronouns, verbs, modifiers)

The Hausa grammars are quite regular and the speakers of Sakkwatanci are supposed to maintain masculine-feminine opposition wherever they can. In colloquial expressions, the subject pronoun and the corresponding form of the verb are not conjoined: '*shi*' ('he') is used together with '*yaa*', and '*ita*' ('she') with '*taa*'. This is the point of the gender in the language, as both Newman (2000) and Jaggar (2001) establish that Standard Hausa is because Sokoto speech does not neutralise these contrasts in colloquial speech.

i. **Pronoun + verb agreement** (Sakkwatanci/Standard):

a. *Shi yaa zaka/shi yaa zo.*

"He came."

b. *Ita taa zaka/ita taa zo.*

"She came."

Gender is also exemplified by the use of modifiers where Hausa morphology offers it. In the human nouns, Sokoto speakers maintain the masculine-feminine derivational contrast (*malami* 'male teacher' vs *malama* 'female teacher; *yaro* 'boy' vs *yarinya* 'girl'), and they tend to employ adjective pairs with distinct feminine forms (Newman, 2000; Jaggar, 2001).

ii. **Noun & adjective pairing:**

a. *yaro dogo* → "a tall boy"

b. *yarinya doguwa* → "a tall girl"

c. *yaro karami* → "a small/young boy"

d. *yarinya karama* → "a small/young girl"

Newman (1991, 2000) describes these as simple instances where Hausa morphology marks feminine with a suffix (*-a*, *-uwa*, or *-iya*) and Sokoto uses it in compliance with those oppositions.

4.2. Gender sensitivity in everyday (unambiguous, ordinary situations)

In both address and reference, the speakers of *Sakkwatanci* always use the appropriate gender-related second-person pronoun (*kai* 'you.M' vs. *ke* 'you.F'), even in more informal contexts: market talk, family talk, and student talk. Jaggar (2001) observes that these pronouns elicit verbal forms in which the correspondence is invariably observed: In Sokoto, this is consistently the case:

i. **Polite address / routine interaction:**

a. To a man: *kai kaa yi nasara.* → "You (M) succeeded."

b. To a woman: *ke kin yi nasara.* → "You (F) succeeded."

In a similar manner, in brief conversations, Sokoto speakers retain *yaa/taa* where the subject changes genders. This is unlike other dialect areas in which '*yaa*' can be generalised. This is field-described as Sokoto-area speech communities habitually referring to it as 'tsantsen Hausa' ('careful/correct Hausa', i.e., no gender levelling) (Bagari, 1982; Newman, 2000).

4.3. Sociolinguistic value: Pure Hausa, prestige, not to be wiped out

Sokoto speech has a reputation of conservativeness and prestige since Sokoto is conventionally linked to the Sokoto Caliphate and Qur'anic scholarship. Sakkwatanci has been repeatedly depicted in the literature as preserving pre-existing phonological and morphosyntactic features (Bagari, 1982) and, as is relevant in this case, as preserving gender contrasts in spontaneous speech. The Sokoto pattern is aligned with a prestige norm, which is difficult to alter, and other city centres can be innovative or simple (Labov, 1972; however, see also Newman, 2000, on standardising pressures). Prestige is practised in the following ways:

- i. Formal (religious speech, school chanting, radio announcements): gender is strictly distinguished (*taa* when it is female and *yaa* when it is male).
- ii. Peer correction: speakers have the option to correct gender disagreement (e.g., '*taa*' instead of '*yaa*' when the object is a female) and count it as a violation of correctness.

- iii. Modelling among learners: instructors and more elder speakers of Sokoto groups are prone to modelling gender-appropriate structures that restore the criteria of differentiation (Jaggar, 2001; Newman, 2000).

In short, where the Hausa grammar provides a masculine/feminine variant to the choice, Sakkwatanci provides and retains the choice. This permanence comprises linguistic habit, identity and prestige.

5. The Usage of Gender in Zaria Dialect (Zazzaganci)

The Zaria dialect, or Zazzaganci, is commonly known to be very lax in its approach to gender distinction, which is quite contrary to the stringency of Sokoto Hausa (Sakkwatanci). This elasticity is manifested even in prefixes in the verbs, in the copulas, and even in nominal constructions.

5.1. Verbal Prefixes Generalisation of Masculinity

In colloquial speech, the speakers of Zazzaganci are likely to attach verbal prefixes in masculine form where verbal prefixes in feminine form are supposed to be used. For example:

- a. *Yaa tafi makaranta.* – “She went to school.”
(Standard Hausa / Sakkwatanci: *Taa tafi makaranta*).

In this case the masculine prefix ‘yaa’ takes the place of the feminine ‘taa’. In comparison, Sakkwatanci speakers would have no problem with the feminine prefix and consider any such replacements ungrammatical.

5.2. Substitution of Masculine Subjects by Feminine

Surprisingly enough, Zazzaganci is not a neutralism of the masculine alone; it also permits feminine marks to take the place of masculine subjects in a very infrequent case:

- a. *Taa taho yanzu.* – “He has just arrived now.”
- b. *Taa ci abinci.* – “He ate food.”

In Sakkwatanci, however, the same would be too strictly written: “*Yaa taho yanzu*” and “*Yaa ci abinci*”, and the masculine-feminine distinction cannot be bent to any degree.

5.3. Copular Constructions (*ne/ce*)

Probably, the most obvious difference would be observed in copular constructions. Standard Hausa and Sakkwatanci Standard Hausa and Sakkwatanci use or omit the ‘ne’ (masc.) or ‘ce’ (fem.):

- a. Sakkwatanci: *Matata ta* – “She is my wife.”
- b. Sakkwatanci: *Yata ta*. – “She is my daughter.”
- c. Sakkwatanci: *Yarona na*. – “He is my son.”

In comparison, Zazzaganci speakers tend to generalise the masculine copula ‘ne’ even with feminine nouns:

- a. Zazzaganci: *Matata ne*. – “She is my wife.”
- b. Zazzaganci: *Yata ne*. – “She is my daughter.”

The generalisation underscores the situation when Zazzaganci flattened the gender system so that *it* is a default irrespective of the gender of the noun.

5.4. Sociolinguistic Underpinnings

These patterns have been associated by researchers such as Newman (2000) and Garba (2006) with historical language contact and the urban cosmopolitan identity of Zaria, which supports innovation and laxity of grammatical norms. Abdulkadir (2017) goes on to state that this flexibility is a kind of urban language identity since Zaria youths contrast with the conservative Hausa speakers in Sokoto. Sakkwatanci, however, has been able to preserve its status as a prestige language, in part due to its links with the Qur’anic scholarship and perceived purity of the Hausa language, and has been used to enforce gender separation.

In general, Zazzaganci is a proficient and imaginative system, and speakers substitute, neutralise or generalise gender signs and construct a new category of forms, including ‘*Matata ne*’ and ‘*Taa taho yanzu*’. Conversely, Sakkwatanci is very conservative and maintains gender distinction when using pronouns, verbs and copulas, like ‘*Matata ce*’ and ‘*Taa tafi makaranta*’. This analogy can

demonstrate how Hausa dialectal division is related to other more basic sociolinguistic dynamics of identity, prestige, and contact.

6. Kananci Usage of Gender (Kano Dialect)

The dialect resulting from the more conservative Sokoto dialect (Sakkwatanci) and the Zaria dialect (Zazzaganci) is known as the Kano dialect, which is also commonly known as 'Kananci'. Though Kananci tends to follow the grammatical patterns of Standard Hausa (indeed, Standard Hausa is also patterned on the Kano dialect), it also has certain tendencies to deviate in practice, particularly in informal urban ones and in certain popular culture products such as Kannywood movies.

6.1. Semi-preserved gender differentiation

In the more formal forms (for example, education, news broadcast, and religious discourse), the major masculine-feminine oppositions of Hausa grammar are still upheld in that Kananci. In formality, e.g., Kananci speakers make a distinction between the following:

- a. *Yaa zo.* – “He came.” (masculine)
- b. *Taa zo.* – “She came.” (feminine)

Similarly, the constructions of copularity largely follow the norms of prescriptivism:

- a. *Matata ce.* – “She is my wife.”
- b. *Yarona ne.* – “He is my son.”

This maintenance is representative of the prestigious position of Kano Hausa, as it is the basis of the codified standard Hausa that is used throughout West Africa (Newman, 2000) and in use by Jaggar (Jaggar, 2001).

6.2. Everyday Speech Deviations

No matter how conservative this ground is, we can also find deviation in informal, urban speech in Kananci. Research focusing on dialect patterns (Relevance of Dialect in Hausa Regional Identity, 2018) notes that in most cases the Kano speakers tend to make dialogue shorter and this is at times the reason why there is reduced anxiety regarding the gender marking. For instance:

- a. Masculine prefixes like '*yaa*' can sometimes be employed in both male and female subjects in a quick or informal talk.
- b. '*Ne*' may be generalised to feminine forms to sometimes form utterances like '*Matata ne*' and '*Matata ce*'.

Though not as systematic as in Zazzaganci, they nevertheless suggest the stresses and strains of urban communication, where fluency and effectiveness are valued more than grammatical correctness (Newman, 2000).

6.3. Media (Kannywood) Evidence

Even more problematic to gender use in Kano is that it is the centre of Hausa media production. Formal Standard Hausa versions are widely intelligible and are used in narration and in formal dialogue in Kannywood movies, radio and television shows. However, it is also possible to represent characters by means of localised Kananci features (which may include gender simplification) in order to either or both represent the speech of young urban people and to give the effect of a stylistically authentic representation.

An example is '*ne*' and '*ce*', which characters may use interchangeably in some Kannywood scripts, and the gender of the noun is taken into account in a humorous or an informal dialogue. This non-neutralisation is a stylistic tool because this is a linguistic deviation.

6.4. Sociolinguistic Factors

The reasons behind this tendency of partial preservation and deviation in Kananci could be explained by a number of sociolinguistic factors:

- i. Standardisation Pressure: Standard Hausa stems out of the Kananci language, and because of formal education and print media, which impose conservatism in gender usage, Standard Hausa is reinforced in its status as a prestige dialect (Jaggar, 2001; Newman, 2000).

- ii. Urban Cosmopolitanism: Kano is a cultural and economic centre, which exposes speakers to a large amount of language contact and multilingual influence, which results in possible neutralisation of grammatical differences (Britannica, 2024).
- iii. Register Sensitivity: Kananci speakers are sensitive to the use of conservative and simplified forms depending on the situation. Gender differences in the formal sphere are carefully observed, whereas in the casual or performative register bending of the rules is acceptable as evidence of the city as an informal space or as belonging to the youth culture.

6.5. Summary

Thus Kananci is a two-dimensional profile; it is the most conservative dialect in the domain of form, which also means that it is a prototype of Standard Hausa, however it can also be simplified in the register in the informal and media domain. Acting in contrast to Sokoto Hausa, which rejects any kind of undermining the gender difference, and in contrast to Zaria Hausa, which tends to treat them as equals, Kano Hausa is a middle ground balancing between conservatism and modernity in its approach to gender.

7. Comparison and discussion

Comparing Sokoto Hausa (Sakkwatanci), Zaria Hausa (Zazzaganci) and Kano Hausa (Kananci) it can be seen that there are significant differences in the way gender distinctions are handled across dialects. Although the three exhibit a similar underlying grammatical system, their actual usage patterns are far more varied, and are influenced in part by sociolinguistic, cultural and historical influences.

7.1. Sakkwatanci as Inflexible and Prescriptive

Sakkwatanci is generally thought to be the most conservative and prescriptive Hausa form of gender marking. Verbs, pronouns, and copulas are rigidly divided by speakers into masculine and feminine, and the resulting forms are:

- a. *Taa tafi makaranta.* – “She went to school.”
- b. *Matata ce(ta).* – “She is my wife.”

This doggedness according to Newman (2000) and Jaggar (2001), has earned Sakkwatanci a reputation of purity and linguistic correctness and has been quoted as the dialect most closely related to standard rules.

7.2. Zazzaganci and Kananci as Descriptive and Flexible

Compared to it, Zazzaganci exhibits the highest level of infringement on gender marking-in fact, it happens more than not. The masculine prefixes (*yaa*) tend to be generalized to both genders but the feminine ones (*taa*), can substitute the masculine referents. The masculine *ne* is commonly used with feminine nouns even in conjunctions of the copula, i.e. *Matata ne*, instead of *Matata ce*. According to Garba (2006), this is a trend that shows the urban informality and tolerance to language in Zaria.

7.3. Variations by Factors

1. Geographic Identity

The historical connections of Sokoto with Islamic scholarly and cultural conservatism have enhanced linguistic conservatism in Sakkwatanci, where deviations are not encouraged. The centres of Zaria and Kano, however, are more cosmopolitan, and where there is an exposure to other languages and dialects, innovation and tolerance of variation are encouraged.

2. Prestige vs. Stigma

Sakkwatanci boasts of its inflexibility and precision and it is widely used to determine what makes a good Hausa. Comparatively, Zazzaganci is even being stigmatised and even mocked in its gender rule violations. Kananci is placed between two worlds: it has remained privileged due to its association with standard Hausa and is flexible enough to enable the identities of urban speech.

3. Education and Literacy

Exposure to education comprises a significant influence on prescriptive norms. More educated speakers who are not dependent on a dialect are more prone to employing more strict gender distinction, typically according to the Sakkwatanci norms. In less formal circles

7.4. Broader Implications

These changes in dialects and gender marking reveal the dynamic interrelationship between language and society. On the one hand, they have represented cultural identity: the tradition and learning are compatible with the conservativeness of Sokoto, but Zaria and Kano continue to project urban cosmopolitanism. Instead, they point at language change processes, where the simplification and neutralisation are logical results of both contact and urban speech practices. Finally, they are a pointer of social change in the sense that education, media and movement continue to impact the status and same-sex direction of Hausa gender differentiation.

In general, we have seen that Hausa is a non-monolithic language yet a sociolinguistic continuum with dialects striking a balance between prescriptive rigidity and descriptive flexibility in defining gender marking.

8. Findings, Conclusion and Recommendations

8.1. Conclusion

As demonstrated in this paper, gender usage in Hausa is not always the same in all the dialects but can be a continuum between conservatism and innovativeness. Where Sokoto Hausa (Sakkwatanci) is an instance of a firm adherence to gender distinctions as regards the use of pronouns, verbs and copulas, Kano Hausa (Kananci) is the case of a mixed profile, where prestige versions are used in formal situations and simplification in informal ones. Zaria Hausa (Zazzaganci) is the most prominent since he usually subverts feminine indicators to the masculine stabiliser (*ya*), thus redefining the conventional gender system. Such tendencies indicate that Hausa grammatical gender is not only a language identity but also a place of change of dialects.

8.2. Findings

The main findings of the study can be summarised in the following way:

- i. Dialectal range: Hausa dialects are characterised by gender conservatism, where Sakkwatanci is the most conservative, Zazzaganci the most innovative and Kananci lies between the two extremes.
- ii. Masculine defaulting: In Zazzaganci, the masculine form (*ya*) is a stabiliser, which in subject-verb concord is often an object of feminine agreement (*ta*) but never vice versa.
- iii. Copulation variances: Sakkwatanci prefer older forms of analysis, such as '*matata ta*' and '*mijina na*', and Standard Hausa and Kananci tend to use '*matata ce*' and '*mijina ne*'.
- iv. Sociolinguistic forces: Urbanisation, education, language contact and identity performance are determining factors of gender variability, where conservative forms of variations are prestigious and orthodox, unlike innovative variations which are informal and modern.
- v. Structural resiliency: Verbal agreement has been neutralised, yet the gender differences are being maintained in the pronominal forms (*shi* vs. *ita*) and in relative forms (*wanda* vs. *wadda*); *thus*, Hausa gender is reorganising, but not entirely.

8.3. Recommendations

The research has the following recommendations based on the findings:

- i. An analytic investigation into effects of social variables on usage of gender markers in Hausa speech (age, gender, education, and media exposure) must be undertaken with the aim of studying the occurrence of gender markers utilised in Hausa dialects, both in Zaria and Kano.
- ii. To elicit the incidence and situations of gender neutralisation in the vernacular Hausa language, corpus building will be necessary to determine how to document the frequency and situations of the constricted dialects and innovations.
- iii. The programmes of language education and standardisation should be aware of the facts of dialects, yet formal Hausa should be unambiguous, meaning that the teaching materials and

the curriculum should be well-balanced between the prestige norms and the normal use of language.

- iv. The practice of the media, especially in Kannywood and broadcasting, should be considerate of the influences of choices made in gender marking in how they impact the perceptions of authenticity or authority and the audience's interest.
- v. A study of gender variation in Africa should be compared with Hausa in a wider context of African language negotiation between conservatism and innovation of grammar systems.

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