Language and Gender Perspectives in Nigerian Theo-religious Contexts

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Abstract

While some research has been carried out on gender and religion in some parts of Africa, studies are yet to attend to how gender perspectives are expressed in the Christian theo-religious context (in Nigeria). This paper addresses this gap by investigating the gender linguistic and discoursal resources deployed by Nigerian theological seminary students to orient to gender beliefs. Two orthodox religious institutions, the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso and the Dominican Institute, Ibadan were purposively sampled. Seventy eight essays, written by all the students (72 males, 6 females) in the two institutions, on "God and Humans" were collected. The essays were subjected to linguistic and pragma-discoursal analyses, with insights from dominance and postmodernist gender theories, discourse tracking and critical discourse analysis. Written communication in theo-religious contexts in Nigeria projects two terms: patriarchal and gender-neutral/balanced. Both male and female genders opt for patriarchal terms to refer to God and humans. Men employ the items subjectively to assert independence and, sometimes, gender superiority; women use them objectively to associate with the male group. Nominal and pronominal gender-neutral/balanced items are used by the two groups. Men either draw on the tokens exclusively to subsume women or inclusively to cover both men and women. Women engage the items inclusively by involving both groups and submissively by presuming presenting neutral tokens with patriarchal items. Gendered language used by seminary students largely reflects the traditional social and religious roles of men and women in the larger Southwestern Nigerian society. Future research can compare

gendered language in the theo-religious institution with that in medical, academic or commercial institutions. It can also compare gender perspectives among male and female students in selected African and Western seminaries.

Key words: religion, gender, seminaries, patriarchal/gender-neutral items, exclusive/ inclusive/ subjective/ submissive usages.

1 Introduction

Sexuality and religion converge at several points. This is because religious roles are largely earmarked on the basis of sex differences and assumed capabilities of members of the sexes by societies. Many prominent leadership roles in many religions are assigned to men, while other less prominent ones are largely given to women, a situation that is quite evident in the Christian religion. While role assignment on a sex basis is being balanced in some parts of the world, the status quo has remained in some others. It is against this background that this paper examines how gender is represented in the language of Christian theo- religious expression in Nigeria. To address the issue correctly, it is essential to devote some attention to the concept of gender per se.

"Gender, in broad terms, refers to the sex-role identity used by humans to emphasise the distinctions between males and females" (Adegbite 2009: 12). It differs from sex in that while sex works with biological and physical features of humans, gender is social and relates to roles and behaviours performed by sexes (Lamidi 2009). In post-modernist thinking, sex and gender are cultural rather than neutral constructs (Cameron 2005). Buttler (1990: 32) sees gender as a performative quality: "Gender is the stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a 'natural' kind of being". This means that gender, in the post-modernist tradition, as will be shown shortly, is considered not "[as] something you acquire once and for all at an early stage of life, but an ongoing accomplishment produced by your repeated actions" (Cameron 2005: 486).

Research in gender-bound language has focused on the way gender comes into communication and how this has influenced the structure and functions of language in general. It has shown how language is drawn upon to construct and come to terms with the semantics and identities of personal, social and cultural dimensions (cf Yusuf 1988, 1993, 1997a; Adegbite 2009).

While some research has been carried out on gender and religion in some parts of Africa, for example North Africa (Sadiqi 2003), studies are yet to attend seriously to how gender perspectives are expressed in the Christian theo-religious context (in Nigeria). Much of what has obtained hitherto have been studies with sociological and anthropological orientations. The other dimension has been the concern about the language of religion in general with reference to Christianity without any specific attention paid to the gender aspect in Africa and Nigeria in particular. These are gaps that should be filled as the sociological and anthropological studies cannot provide a full x- ray of the gender picture in religious discourses. It is essential to determine the

linguistic tools drawn upon in Christianity discourses and the possible influence of the institution on the choices made. The paper is thus interested in investigating the gender linguistic and discoursal resources engaged in theo-religious expression in Nigeria and clarify, to some extent, the state of gender theorising in the discourse.

2 Methodology and Design

Two religious institutions, namely, the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso and the Dominican Institute, Ibadan, representing the Baptist and Catholic denominations were purposively sampled. The two institutions offer degrees in Theology (and philosophy), and were, therefore, considered appropriate for the data utilised for the study as the students were advanced ones who had largely formed their own opinions about issues and were capable of some level of critical thinking, expected to reflect in their language use, especially with respect to gender construction. At different times, each of the Use of English classes of the institutions (where I was teaching as an adjunct lecturer) was subjected to a spontaneous writing exercise on the topic "God and Humans". A total of 78 essays, written by all the students in the two institutions, were collected. Seventy two of the students were men, while only six were women. The essays were subjected to linguistic and pragma-discoursal analyses, relating to gender perspectives and representation. Insights were particularly deployed from aspects of dominance and post modernist gender theories, discourse tracking and critical discourse analysis. In the next section (i.e. 3), I review gender and theo-religious discourse. In section 4, I review the theoretical perspectives within which the data is housed. In section 5, I review studies on gender and religion. In Section 6, I review gender theories. In Section 7, I analyse the data and present my findings. In section 8, I conclude the paper.

3 Gender Linguistics and Theo-religious Discourse

Gender linguistics refers to the study of language elements that point to human sexes. This however does not work perfectly within the traditional grammatical concept of gender. According to Corbett (1991: 1), to understand what linguists mean by 'gender', a good starting point is Hockett's definition: 'Genders are classes of nouns reflected in the behaviour of associated words' (1958: 231). A language may have two or more such classes of genders. The classification frequently corresponds to a real-world distinction of sex, at least in part, but often too it does not ('gender' derives etymologically from Latin *genus,* via Old French *gender,* and originally meant 'kind' or 'sort'). The word 'gender' is not used for just a group of nouns but also for the whole category; thus we may say that a particular language has, say, three genders, masculine, feminine and neuter, and that the language has the category of gender.

The three genders, masculine, feminine and neuter, are represented in English through nouns and pronouns. These include, respectively, "man" (his, him), "woman" (her, hers), "animal" (it). However, there are many words in English that do not fit with the genders, especially the masculine and the feminine. These words, in the pre-

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feminist linguistic movement period were associated with the masculine gender, e.g. "doctor" (his), "engineer" (his), etc. The situation has however changed with the feminist linguistic revolution which has brought many gender-balanced and gender-neutral elements into the English language. These changes are largely reflected in anaphoric pronominal reference. Partitive pronouns such as "everybody", "somebody", "anybody", etc no longer take the masculine anaphor "his", but rather "his/her" or "her/his", depending on the perspective and stance of the writer. The singular "they" has also been introduced to neutralise the genderisation of common nouns such as "doctor", "student", "engineer", etc. The pronoun "they" is also applicable to partitive pronouns.

Changes have also occurred with respect to gendered nouns such as "man", "chairman", etc which have respectively been neutralised as "man and woman", "humans or human"; and "chairperson". Maxims such as "Man proposes, God disposes" have be re-constructed as "To propose is human, to dispose divine" (Yusuf 1997b). This example points to how aspects of religious discourse have been influenced by developments in feminist linguistics. The problem with the original (former) expression, "Man proposes, God disposes" is its patriarchal posture which presents the man as subsuming the woman. Scholars of religions (e.g. Grohman 1998) such as Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism and Islam, who are not favourably disposed to the patriarchal order that rules the religions and who have converged under the aegis of feminist theology have challenged this order, and have proposed balanced linguistic and discourse tools to handle the biases in the religions. The goals of feminist theology, therefore, includes: raising the level of the role women play in the clerical circle, revising the patriarchal image and language attached to God in the religions, placing women appropriately in the religions' concepts of career and motherhood, and investigating the portrayal of women in the scriptural texts (Grohman 1998; *Encyclopaedia of Science and Religion*, 2009; Cline 2009).

The present research is, in part, concerned with the feminist theologist's revision of the language used in reference to God and dominant patriarchal influence on Christianity. This interest immediately necessitates the inclusion of ideology in the framework for handling the data. This consideration is taken together with discourse tracking which explains the network of reference items employed by my population in this research.

4 Theoretical Perspectives: Discourse Tracking and Ideology

Odebunmi (2010: 3) defines tracking as "the linguistic and discoursal means by which connections are maintained between different parts of texts to enhance the sense-making process of the texts". This means that tracking incorporates all the devices employed in a text to ensure textuality and comprehension.

Martin and Rose (2003) identify four types of tracking resources: presenting, presuming, possessive and comparative. Presenting devices introduce discourse items, which are, subsequently, referred to by presuming devices. Possessive resources mark off possession while comparative ones point out the relationships between propositions and discourse items. One point to note is that all the four

resources can be subsumed, in functional terms, under the presenting and presuming frames. In these frames, the following devices are engaged: anaphora, bridging, cataphora, esphora, homophora and exophora. Anaphora makes reference to the back, e.g. "Professor Davidson is tall. *He* is also handsome". Bridging connects a presenting discourse item indirectly, e.g. "The Independent Electoral Commission took the lead. *The Commision* was commended for its efforts". Cataphoric reference goes forwards, e.g. "Here is *the news:* a suicide bomber was caught in Lagos". Esphoric reference goes forward within a single frame, e.g. "The plea *of the accused".* Homophora moves outside the text on the basis of common ground shared between interactants e.g. "*The* International Legal Commission". Exophoric reference picks out items outside the text; e.g. "*We* shall do our best to save his life, the doctor said".

As Odebunmi (2010) argues, tracking has a high ideological value for the proposition tracked, and the tracking devices drawn upon are often rooted in certain institutionalised beliefs. Ideology is defined as "implicit assumptions held, largely in interaction with power relations" (Odebunmi 2010: 3 [Fairclough 2001, Wodak 1996]). Odebunmi states further that it is in this implicitness that lies the capacity of ideology to give sustenance to power inequalities and thus serve "political purposes" (p.3). In a related manner, placing ideology in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) where it has always resided, Wodak (2007: 209) submits:

> Ideology, for CDA, is seen as an important means of establishing and maintaining unequal power relations. CDA takes a particular interest in the ways in which language mediates ideology in a variety of social institutions.

In the same vein, Fairclough (2003: 9) observes that ideology relates to "representations of aspects of the world which can be shown to contribute to establishing, maintaining and changing of social relations of power, dominations and exploitation". This is done subtly, but at some times overtly (van Dijk 1998, 2007; Fairclough 2001, 2003).

The fact that ideology resides in social groups makes it institutional and is therefore beyond the individual. The fact is that genders, races, classes, and groups have ideologies which influence their perspectives and horizons. Thus, the Christian religion as a social institution does not escape the grip of ideology which reflects in its patriarchal framing and orientation, and which has consequently attracted criticisms and reactions from feminist theologists as stated earlier. It is therefore interesting to investigate how gender ideology manifests in the theological environment and or religious discourse in Nigeria.

5 Studies on Gender and Religion

Gender and religion have received good attention in the literature. Much of the studies in this direction has come from sociological, anthropological and theological perspectives. Gallagher and Smith (1999) evaluate the degree of the challenge posed to institutionalised masculinity by modern evangelical standards. They observe that what holds sway, to a great extent, among evangelicals is a situation-driven relation of

equality between men and women. In another study on evangelicals, Gallagher (2004) looks at the position of conservative Protestants on feminism. He finds out that, to the protestant, feminism has no religious or political influence.

Wolkomier (2004) investigates how Christian women who are conservatives negotiate identities in the gay spousal context. He submits that the women in this condition simply look up to God for help. Adams (2009) explores the prohibition of women from holding leadership positions in the church. Avishai (2008) moves beyond the literature that interrogates women's complicity by considering the agency of religious women as a conduct within the precincts of religious practice.

Read (2000) examines the conflicts that emerge in terms of the meanings associated with veiling among the elite who are Muslims and Muslims who are feminists. He investigates how the conflicts bear on the negotiation of identity among Muslim women who veil and those who do not. The Tijaniyya group in Kano, Nigeria, is studied by Huston (2001) in terms of the manifestation of the patriarchal order in the group. The paper shows that women in high spiritual positions in the group submit to the group's patriarchy while still exhibiting some level of independence.

In the literary axis, Causey (2009) reviews Ania Loomba's book, *Shakespeare, Race and Colonialism* in which the author (Loomba) discusses the space allocated to women in the Shakespearean play, *Othello,* and the link this establishes with men and religion. This focus, like that of the others already reviewed, immediately separates the present study from the existing ones on gender and religion. It is thus clear that rare are the studies that have addressed language and gender perspectives in religious discourse. As part of its scope, this study is charting a new path in the linguistic investigation of the feminist theologists' impacts on theo-religious discourse in Nigeria and examining the extent to which the language of religious expression has sustained or devalued institutional patriarchy in Christianity.

6 Gender Theories

Gender theories have been approached from two angles: binary and non-binary. The binary angle bifurcates into dominance and difference approaches while the non-binary one considers gender, as a construction, on a domain and specific basis. First I, consider the binary approach.

6.1 Binary Theories of Gender

Each of dominance and difference approaches is considered briefly here. First, I take the dominance theory. Through what Lakoff (1975:10) dubs, "talking like a lady", she describes the way male dominance over the female reflects in language use. This path was one of the earliest ones followed in gender research in the 1970s where the issue of male dominance and female subservience was considered (Lakoff 1975; Spender 1980).

The dominance patterns identified as features of women's language are presented as follows:

1.   Lexical hedges e.g. you know, sort of …
2.   Tag question e.g. she is very nice, isn't she?
3.   Rising intonation and declaratives, e.g. It's really good
4.   Empty adjectives e.g. divine, charming, etc
5.   Precise colour terms, e.g. magenta, acqamarine
6.   intensifiers such as *just* and *so*
7.   Hypercorrect grammar, e.g. consistent use of standard verb forms
8.   Superpolite forms, e.g. indirect requests, euphemisms
9.   Avoidance of strong swears words, e.g. fudge, my goodness
10. Emphatic stress, e.g. it was a BRILLIANT performance (Holmes 1993:314[Lakoff 1975])

These features have been perceived by early feminist scholars as indices of women's subordinateness to men and the latter's powerfulness. Yet much as these theorists have been able to challenge some dominance tendencies among certain groups of men, they have been criticised for being narrow in scope and for not being representative in terms of the totality of all women's linguistic behaviours.

The difference theorists, on the other hand, do not see the language of men and women as reflecting tendencies of dominant and dominated groups. Rather, they "turned to an analysis of the socially constructed differences between women's and men's language, seeing these as akin to dialects spoken by different groups who interacted with each other" (Mills, 2003:166). Tannen (1991) contends that women's language should essentially differ from men's because the two undergo different socialisation processes in which they are made to opt for different styles of language. She further argues that the two genders go into conversational interactions with different interests: men are interested in "rapport talk" while men are interested in "report talk" (cf Mills 2003: 166).

Ambitious as the stance of the difference theorists sounds, it has been flawed on the ground that it is politically reactionary and that it is blind to the asymmetry common in men/women relations (cf Troemel-Ploetz, 1998). Cameron (1998) also decries the absence of power relations in the theoretical conception of gender by difference theorists, a feature that she considers quintessential in the interactions between men and women.

6.2 Non-Binary Theory

The non-binary theory of gender emanates from the criticisms of both approaches in the binary class. The non-binary approach is thus shifted away from the overgeneralising and dichotomysing stances of the binary group. Theorists in this group are "interested in making more nuanced and mitigated statements about certain groups of women or men in particular circumstances, who reaffirm, negotiate with, and challenge the parameters of permissible or socially sanctioned behaviour" (Mills 2003: 169-170.Some studies in this direction include Cameron and Coates (1988), Johnson and Meinhoff (1997), Bing and Bergall (1996), Witing (1992) and Queen (1997). These theorists have examined, in pragmatic terms, linguistic relations and identity

representations among men and women in different communities and among different groups such as miners, racial groups and lesbians.

Scholars in the non-binary school have, since early 1990s, shifted gender theoretic thinking from "binary difference [to] diversity of gendered and sexual identities and practices" (Cameron 2005: 482). This direction has been christened "Postmodernist perspective", "social constructionism" and "third wave" (Cameron 2005). Cameron who prefers "postmodernist" identifies the following coverage of the theory:

i. Foundational status of sex: the binary distinction between sex and gender are challenged, and either is observed to be constructed rather than natural;

ii. Performativity: gender/ gender construction is observed to be acted and ongoing;

iii. Diversity: gender identities are revised: "intra-group differences and inter-group similarities are as significant as differences between groups";

iv. Local explanation: masculinity and femininity features are localized;

v. 'Liminal' focus: "more interest in non-mainstream and 'queer' gender identities, and in relation of gender to sexual identities and heteronormality"
(Cameron 2005:484)

While postmodernist theory is the most current in gender studies, I have found several aspects of dominance theory relevant to the discourse I studied. The practice of Christianity in Nigeria accords more recognition to men than women in religious activities, which reveals unequal power relations. The choice of dominance theory and aspects of Critical Discourse Analysis thus become inevitable. However, I situate the work in the postmodernist tradition by considering the language features observed largely as specific to the theo-religious context in Nigeria rather than as general to all men and women in Nigeria or universal to the two groups.

7 Analysis and Findings

As stated in Section 2, 78 essays, all of which were analysed for gender elements, were collected from the two institutions sampled. Seventy two (72) of these were males while six (6) were females. The analysis of the data is both quantitative and qualitative.

The data reveal that two gender-related terms recur in the written discourse of theological students in Nigeria, namely, patriarchal terms and gender – neutral/ balanced terms. The realisations of these terms are tested against the tenets of feminist theologists, which:

i. reject the notion that God has a male gender

ii. do not encourage the use of male pronouns to refer to God

Each of the terms identified is now taken in turn.

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7.1 Patriarchal Terms

The patriarchal terms observed in the discourse are considered in terms of those used with reference to God and those used in relation to human beings as males or females. I consider each below.

7.1.1 God in the Patriarchal Picture

Five items are associated with God in the discourse: "God", "Father", "He", "His" and "Him". Details of the realisations are presented in the chart below:
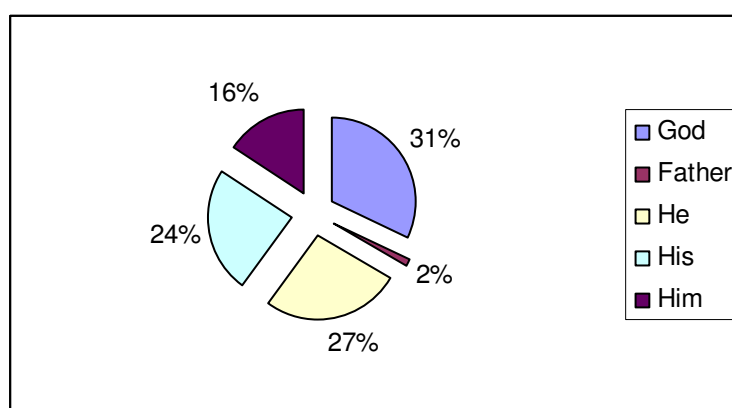

Figure 1: "God" and Patriarchy

Figure I shows that with 31%, 'God' takes predominance over "He" (with 27%), which, in the data, tracks it anaphorically. "His", a variant of 'He' (with 24%) follows 'He'. This is followed by 'him', (with 16%), another pronominal variant of "He". 'Father' takes the least percentage (2%).

The subjects do not consider an alternative for "God" despite the teachings of feminist theologists which encourage such. One expects the alternative to be reflected, at least, in the pronominal variants, especially if "God" is considered a neutral term. This does not occur as the population either repeat "God" across their essays or replace 'God' with patriarchal variants: "He", "His" and "Him". "Father" is however not as frequently used as these pronominal items. The pragmatics of this low representation would emerge by and by.

It is essential to consider how the groups represent the terms. The table below provides the information:

Variable: "God"	Male = 72	Female = 6	Total	%
God	72	6	78	40.84
Father	01	03	04	2.09
He	60	05	11	5.76
His	57	03	60	31.41
Him	36	02	38	19.90
	226	19	245	100

Table 1: Male and Female Representations of "God"

Table 1 shows the variation in the realisation of "God" by the groups. Percentage scores of the each gender are more revealing:

Variable	Gender	Items	Frequency	%
"God"	Feminine	God	6	31.58
		Father	3	15.79
		He	5	26.32
		His	3	15.79
		Him	2	10.53
		Total	19	100

Table 2: Female Representation of "God"

Variable	Gender	Items	Frequency	%
"God"	Masculine	God	72	31.86
		Father	01	0.44
		He	60	26.55
		His	57	25.22
		Him	36	15.93
		Total	226	100

Table 3: Male Representation of "God"

From tables 2 and 3, it is shown that there is hardly any obvious difference between the way the groups realise the items "God", "he" and "him". There is however a clear difference in the realisation of "Father". With 3 out of the six subjects (15.79 overall; 50% on a single sex (female) basis)) opting for "father" among the female population and 1 out of 72 selecting same (0.4) among the male group, a serious ideological implication emerges. The principle of dominance and subservience obviously comes into play. This is consistent with African Gender ideologies. The men, already playing the social role of "father", are not instinctively drawn to the choice of the word, but the women, admitting the superiority of men, perhaps, see God as "father". This becomes interesting in the light of current trends in spousal discourse in Nigeria, especially in Southwestern Nigeria, where the research took place. I have personally observed that husbands are generally referred to as "our daddy" (our father) by many Christian married women. This phenomenon was only transferred into the theo-religious context by prospective female pastors, some of whom were not yet married.

The subservience shown in the choice of "father" by the female population again defeats the stance of feminine theologists regarding both the use of non- patriarchal terms for "God", and the encouragement of neutral terms to describe the Almighty God. This then speaks of the institutionalisation of male dominance in the mainstream theology which precedes feminist theology, and which is the major focus of the theological schools studied. The ideology could also be traced to the culture of the people of Southwestern Nigeria, and, to a large extent, Nigeria and Africa in general,

which places the man at the head point and makes the woman to submit to him, the same situation that spurred feminist theology in the first place.

7.1.2 Men and Women in the Patriarchal Picture

The data present only two items which situate men and women in the patriarchal frame: "mankind" and "man". Table 4 shows the distribution across the data:

Variable	Items	Frequency	%
"Men and women"	Mankind	3	4.84
	Man	59	95.16
	Total	62	100.00

Table 4: Men, Women and Patriarchy

Table 4 shows that "man" occurs in about 95.16% compared to "mankind" which occurs in about 4.84%. This shows that both groups prefer the term "man" to "mankind", perhaps for the Christian institutional ideology and Nigerian cultural intervention already discussed above. It is, however, interesting to move beyond this general picture to see how each group perceives the items. Details are found in Table 5 below:

Variable "Men and women"	Mankind	Man	Total
Male	3 (5.2%)	55 (94.8%)	58
Female	0	04 (100%)	04

Table 5: Genders' Realisations of "Mankind" and "Man"

The table shows that men use the term "man" more frequently than women do, but they use "mankind" not a frequently as they do "man". Women, on their own part, in the two institutions, do not draw on "mankind" at all. Table 5 presents interesting findings by showing that:

i. more women than men employ "man"
ii. only a small number of men use "mankind"
iii. No woman uses "mankind"

We can deduce from these findings that the dominance of the patriarchal order still accounts for the predominant use of "man", especially by the women, who prefer it to "mankind" which they largely replace with other plural forms as will be shown later. The argument that the subjects, including the males, consider "mankind" as an overtly plural form, when compared to "man", applies across the data. Hence, many of the men also avoid it, and opt for the clearer "man".

It is interesting to note that many of the men use "man" differently from the way women use it. An example follows:

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(1) **Man, representing humans**, has

 seen that humans have

 dual values – the physical

 nature and the divine nature.

This claim "man representing humans" does not just dwell on the generic knowledge of "man"; it touches also on the socio-cultural conception that a woman is subordinate to a man. This is more so in the context of Christianity, in which the sampled population operate, where Paul has declared that women should be silent in the church, an order which has permeated the Christendom especially in Nigeria, despite the intervention of feminist theology.

Women, on the other hand, use "man" in an objective manner, while still referring to both groups. The following example explains this point:

(2) **Man** committed sin and became

 sinners in the sight of God, [sic]

 that was how the relationship broke.

The woman-subject here submits to the patriarchal order by allowing herself to be carried along with the man. She sees herself as a part of the man, a tendency which Christianity and its mainstream theology advance.

As hinted at earlier, "mankind" is treated as a plural form. Hence, many of the subjects (males and females) opt for other alternatives. An example is presented below:

(3) God is the final judge of the [sic]

 mankind that is human [sic] are

 responsible to unlike other creatures

In this example, the male subject chooses a nominal rather than a pronominal item to make the required anaphoric reference as he is not sure if 'they' would fit in the context. "Mankind" not "man" is selected by the subject as a neutral term, post-referred by "human[s]" intended as its co-intensive reformulation. This applies in a large number of cases.

7.2 Gender–neural and Gender- Balanced Items

The data do not reveal any gender neutral item for "God", but there are a few gender-neutral items engaged with respect to men and women. Some of these are nominal while some are pronominal in form. Their occurrences are presented in the table below:

Variable	Item	Frequency	Percentage
"Men and women"	Humankind	02	1.02
	The people	08	4.08
	Humanity	09	4.59
	Male and female	11	5.61
	Human being	34	17.35
	All people	06	3.06
	Humans	68	34.69
	Every one/anyone his/her, him/her	28	14.29
	Us	08	4.08
	We	22	11.22
	Total	196	100

Table 6: Men, Women and Gender Neutral/balanced Items

Table 6 presents both gender-neutral ("humankind", "the people", "humanity", "human beings", "all people", "humans", "us" and "we") and gender-balanced ("male/female", "man/woman", "everyone/anyone/his/her", "him/her") items. The higher percentage carried by humans could be attributed to the inclusion of the item in the topic of the essay examined. Hence, about 68 out of the 78 subjects use it. Apart from that, it is used as a plural form, a quality which patriarchal items such as "mankind" lack. Hence, in most instances where the plural form for the patriarchal "man" or other singular–masculine items is required, the default choice is "humans" or "human beings" which comes next to "humans" in distribution. One discourse example can be cited here to explain this point:

(4) God created man in His own
    image in order for them [sic] to
    oversees [sic] all the creation [sic]
    God made or created. **Human beings**
    were the result of the sixth day of
    creation in the diary of God.

Here, "human beings" preempted in the first sentence as "them" (mistaken for the plural form of "man" in anaphoric relations) comes in as the plural form of "man" where the male subject here intends to refer to "all people".

Other gender-neutral or gender-balanced items are used as presenting or presuming elements to track "human" in the essays. Their uses vary according to the preference of the writer. The following example presents a good demonstration of the tracking pattern of the items:

(5) Evil found its root in the disobedience of **Adam** and **Eve**. Since then, *man* has had to struggle and sweat to get *his* daily bread. God in his mercy despite man's disobedience still bestows blessings on *him.* Man also recognises God's tender love. When God blesses *him,* he smiles and says 'Thank God'. *Some* even go as far as crying. This happens when *someone* is at the climax of his happiness…

Across the extract here, many alternatives are provided for "man", which begins from the proper nouns "Adam" and "Eve". The male subject here does not see the male apart from the female. Rather, he lumps then into "man" in his anaphoric anchorage of the creation. Subsequently, he chooses "his", "him" and "everyone" when he tracks the singular "man", and "some" when he states the plural, whose synonym is "some people" if enriched (cf Sperber and Wilson 1987; Odebunmi 2005).

It should be rewarding to attempt a consideration of a possible gender influence on the choice of gender-neutral and gender- balanced items. The tables below show the distributions on gender bases.

Variable	Item	Frequency	Percentage
"Men and women" Gender: Masculine	Humankind	02	1.10
	The people	08	4.42
	Humanity	09	4.97
	Male and female	11	6.08
	Human being	30	16.57
	All people	05	2.76
	Humans	63	34.81
	Every one/anyone his/her, him/her	25	13.81
	Us	08	4.42
	We	20	11.05
	Total	181	100

Table 7: Men and Gender-neutral/Balanced Items

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Variable	Item	Frequency	Percentage
Men and women	Humankind	00	00
Gender: Feminine	The people	00	00
	Humanity	00	00
	Male and female	00	00
	Human being	04	26.67
	All people	01	06.67
	Humans	05	33.33
	Every one/anyone his/her, him/her	03	20.00
	Us	00	00
	We	02	13.33
	Total	15	100

Table 8: Women and Gender-Neutral/Balanced Items

While Table 7 shows that all the gender items are engaged by men albeit at different, sometimes, low degrees, only 5 out of the ten items are used by women. The two groups have as their highest occurrences "humans" (males: 34.81; females: 33.33), the reason for which can be got from the earlier explanation regarding the topic of the essay and the factor of default plural. The same applies to "human being" which men apply at 16.57% and women at 26.67%. There is also some degree of correlation between the men's engagement of "everyone…" and "we", both of which apply to humanity in general. There is however a clear difference in the genders' realisation of "all people" which is ranked fifth in the women category (2.76), and ninth in the men category (6.67).

It is difficult to read a strictly sexist meaning into the realisations of the items, merely based on the figures and the varying occurrences. This is because all the items are engaged by the two groups to describe general human experiences, and sometimes to find alternative plural forms for the generic "man" (by both groups) and "mankind" (by the male group only). However, a scrutiny of contextual uses by the groups brings out some ideological indices which point to their various perspectives on gender roles in the religious context. This issue will be handled with respect to "human", "human being" and "everyone…."

It is observed that despite the neutral nature of "humans", many of the female subjects still assign patriarchal anaphors to it. An example is shown below:

(6) Moreso, despite all the love
   that God showed to **human,** [sic]
   he still went ahead and
   disobeyed him.

"He" here used by a female subject tracking "human" [s] is ordinarily unacceptable. But Beyond the grammar of the construction, the ideology of institutionalised subservience leaks, which fights against the tenets of feminist theology. On the other

hand, the male subjects are more consistent in their use of pronouns tracking "humans", as there is hardly any such use as "she" to refer to "human" in any context as is common in current gender-neutral discourse styles (see Allot 2010). Generally, these subjects track the item with the plural pronoun "they/their", or repeat the item "humans" as many times as they need to refer to it. Where an error occurs in terms of number, male subjects prefer "he/him" to track "human". Some of these points are demonstrated below:

(7) [God] chose **human** [sic] to rule
over everything created. As if
that is not enough, God
created **human.** He created **him**
in his own image.

In (7), "human" is repeated in sentence 2. The error of number in "human[s]" notwithstanding, "him" is used by the male subject to track "human".

The patriarchal attachment to "human" is also evident in "human being" in the essays written by the women. In cases where "human beings" is used, the female subjects select 'they' or "their" as may be applicable but where the error form "human being" is used, the female subject largely opts for the patriarchal pronoun "he" and its variants. An example follows:

(8) God loves human being [sic], **he**
also needs to love God in
return.

Evident here is the default "he" which has been imposed by the religious institution and culture as stated earlier. On the part of men, the same pattern of use as of "human" is observed.

"Everyone", "anyone", "whosever", "his/her', and 'him/her' are used in two different ways. It is here that the women are seen to express some degree of assertiveness. In cases where female subjects use any of the partitive pronouns, "his/her" or "him/her" usually follows, as appropriate. The example below explains this:

(9)   …**anybody** who accepts this
Son as **his** or **her** personal
Lord and Saviour would be free
from the punishment of sin

In (9), "his/her" is selected to track the presenting "anybody" by a female subject. This is common in cases where gender-balanced items occur. It is possible to conjecture that the female subjects are free with "his/her" because it also includes men, itself considered a safe way to "play gender" in a highly gendered institution like the Christian religion and a culture like the Yoruba society.

The trend among the men, sometimes, glides with that of the women perhaps largely because it also balances the equation and because it is supported by the

English grammar. However, the grammar notwithstanding, some female subjects impose the patriarchal personal pronoun on the partitive or other related items. The following example explains this point:

(10) …**whoever** knows **himself**
as a sinner and then confesses and
repents, He is merciful and faithful
to forgive **him**

"Him" in (10) tracks "whoever" in the first part of the extract. Barring grammatical considerations, "himself" and "him" introduce the patriarchal order into the discourse, and emphasise the norm in the main theological context.

8 Implications of Findings and Conclusion

I have, in the foregoing, discussed, with respect to written communication in theo-religious contexts in Nigeria, two terms: patriarchal and gender-neutral/balanced terms. The patriarchal terms bifurcate into terms for God and terms for humans. Both genders opt for patriarchal terms to refer to God and humans. However, variation occurs with respect to items used for humans: men employ the items subjectively to assert gender superiority; women use them objectively to submit to male dominance.

Both nominal and pronominal items, which are gender-neutral/balanced are used by the groups: 10 by men and 5 by women. Men either draw on the tokens exclusively to subsume women or inclusively to cover both men and women. Women on their part engage the items inclusively by involving both groups and submissively by presuming presenting neutral tokens with patriarchal items.

In the long run, the perspectives that emerge from the findings are largely posed against the situation in the Western world where feminist theology and its tenets have wielded so much influence. This immediately invites cultural difference into the scene. For, while many Nigerian cultures are collectivistic in nature, many Western ones are individualistic. Also, while submission to the patriarchal order is fed into the socialisation process a typical Yoruba (sometimes Nigerian and African) woman undergoes, the situation differs in the West. The Christian religious institution, itself a patriarchal religion hosted by cultures which are themselves patriarchy-compliant, could do no less than encourage dominance of the female group by the male. Hence, it is difficult for the linguistic and theological revolutions in the address system and conception of roles to be allowed good roots in the Nigerian theo-religious soil.

Some studies on gender-neutral usage in the non-religious context have shown some level of awareness of Nigerians of non-gendered terms and expressions. Yusuf and Olateju (2004), for example, have examined the use of "singular they" among teachers. Lamidi (2009) has studied how academics in a South- western Nigerian University have conceived, applied and accepted gender-neutral pronouns. These studies do not strictly consider gender distinction, yet each has established some level of gender-neutral compliance in English usage by the populations. This sets the studies

apart from the present one and, at the same time, points to the distinction between secular discourse and religious discourse.

The point is that English usage in the theo-religious context in Nigeria largely complies with the principles of dominance. It is, therefore, necessary for further studies to compare English usage in the religious institution in Nigeria with English usage in other institutions such as medical, academic or commercial. It will also be interesting to compare, perhaps using the same type of population (i.e. male and female theological seminary students) theo-religious discourse in Nigeria (or Africa) with religious discourse in the West where feminist theology has deep roots.

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