

At Kenyatta University, women speak better and men write better

By

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Abstract

At postgraduate theses defence sessions in Kenyatta University I have observed that as a general rule both men and women are capable of making good oral presentations. However, I have also observed that women are more likely to make better oral presentations even when their written work is not so good. A man making a good oral presentation, on the other hand, is also more likely to have good written work as well. What may be the explanation? It is unlikely that these differences emanate from the curriculum since both girls and boys pursue the same curriculum from kindergarten to University. I propose that the reason is to be found in the institution of patriarchal hegemony as found in Kenya and in many other societies. This has meant that while the written word is a male-dominated sphere, verbal speech has been more difficult for patriarchy to regulate. As a result, in oral speech women are presented with an opportunity to excel more than they have been able to do through writing. It is my contention that this situation can further be explained by the theory of gene-culture coevolution. Gene-culture coevolution is the proposition that our cultural environment is capable of influencing our genetic evolution as well. Thus, while writing has evolved culturally as a male-dominated field because of patriarchy, women have, as a consequence, adapted better to speech. My contention is that it is this process of gene-culture coevolution that explains this general trend of women being better speakers while men are better writers; at least, at Kenyatta University.

Key Words: Kenyatta University, Gene-culture coevolution, patriarchy, oral speech, writing.

Introduction

Anthropologists tell us that it is culture (and our use of language), that separates us humans from the other animals. It is language that enables the transmission of culture. No one has as yet come up with a convincing explanation of why or how language came to be. However, of one thing we can be fairly certain because we see it every day; the first person to facilitate a child learning a language is his/her mother (or her surrogate). By and large mothers are the first teachers of language and by that very token also the primary purveyors of culture. That one's language is called "mother tongue" is therefore not without a valid reason.

Women or more particularly, mothers are therefore in a unique position with regard to shaping and transmitting language. They have an important role to play in deciding which forms of it are correct and appropriate to pass on to the young. Given this role it is not farfetched to say that in virtually all cultures women tend to be well-spoken and have an easier facility of verbal speech than men. I may go so far as to suggest that this may be one of the reasons why in most verbal arguments between men and women, men are unlikely to prevail. Most wise men have learned to quickly remove themselves from such situations; some who may not be as wise may have to plead temporary insanity in explaining their actions following such exchanges!

But that facility with language in women somehow seems to disappear when it comes to the written word. I have observed in the course of listening to students' presentations both in class and at oral theses defences that by and large while both men and women are capable of making good oral presentations, on the whole women's written work tend to fall below their standards of oral presentation. I have also observed that while a man who makes a good oral presentation is also likely to have good written work, this is less often the case with women students.

I want to begin by stating that this brief paper is not based on any empirical study and is therefore based largely on impressionistic evidence. As such my observations are based on my experiences in two settings. The first is in oral class presentations of semester assignments. The second setting is in oral theses defences by candidates for Master degrees and Doctor of Philosophy degrees in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, the School of Education, and the School of Public Health at Kenyatta University. Considering that Kenyatta University has nearly 20 schools my observations therefore cover only a small fraction of such presentations in the whole university; and hardly even all such presentations in these three schools.

It is also important to note that all these presentations are made in English, the language of academia in Kenya. The use of the English language in the education system is part of our colonial heritage and English is therefore almost invariably a second, third or even fourth language of most students.

The following arguments are based, first, on the part of oral presentations, purely on my assessment as a lecturer of one's presentation skills and their ability to persuade the listener that one knows what she or he is talking about. My assessments on writing skills and ability are based on what I have read and in comparing the spoken and the written word. All of which I readily admit, are quite subjective. On top of all that I am also a man. These observations are therefore intended more than anything to provoke thought, argument and hopefully, opportunities for a more empirical study.

I will therefore begin by stating that in my experience, gender is not a factor when it comes to predicting excellence in academic work or in oral presentation of such work. The general statements made in this paper should therefore be read with the sociological caveat of probabilities and should be seen only in that light. Thus, while I argue that women generally speak better there are occasions when men have made excellent presentations. By the same token although I argue that men on the whole write better there have been women who have delivered excellent written work.

Over the last 25 or so years that I have been a lecturer at Kenyatta University, it appears to me that there must be some explanation for this trend that I have observed time and again. In this paper I try to offer an explanation for it, that of gene-culture coevolution.

Gene-culture coevolution, also called biocultural evolution or dual inheritance theory argues that human behavior is a product of two different and interacting evolutionary processes: cultural evolution and genetic evolution (Boyd & Richerson, 1995). I assume under cultural evolution the social learning of speaking and writing respectively and how they have evolved in relation to men and women.

A brief history of the written word

One of my favourite verses of the New Testament in the *Holy Bible* is the opening verse of the Gospel according to John: “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*” (John 1:1, The New King James Version). I find this verse to be profound at many levels, one of which is that I see in it a possible explanation of why men and women are wired differently with regard to verbal speech and written communication. The Judeo-Christian God in most contemporary portrayals is seen as male. The fact that Jesus Christ (his son) was male and is regarded by Christians as God on Earth reinforces this perception of God as male. This close relationship between religion and the written word therefore has its origins in history. And it is a history that practically equates the written word with Man. From Europe (through the Christian missionaries) this relationship is replicated in Africa in general and in Kenya in particular through the same mechanisms.

The word (***logos***) that St. John refers to goes back to the beginning of Biblical time to the book of Genesis. And it is ***written*** (no doubt by a man, as a representation of the image of God). The point that I am making is that the written word has evolved only as Man (as opposed to Woman) has primarily dictated and the written word insofar as it differs from the spoken word is a tool fashioned by Man rather than by Woman.

Just as a point of information, Eighty per cent of Kenyans are nominal Christians (Ombaka, 2013). Christianity in Kenya is closely associated with the written word for two major reasons. The first goes back to ancient Egypt. We are told that writing has its origins in the Fertile Crescent – that land that straddles the Rivers Nile, Euphrates and the Tigris – and dates back to some 3,300 years before Jesus Christ. Indeed the early Egyptian characters were called ***hieroglyphs*** by the Greeks of 500 BC because this form of writing was reserved for holy texts; ***hieros*** and ***glypho*** meaning “sacred” and “engrave” in Greek respectively (Historyworld, 2017).

The second reason, and from more recent times, is that the first civilizations in the modern era in Africa with written script were Islamic. However, a more pervasive influence came about as a result of the

activities of Christian missionaries from around the fifteenth century onwards. I suspect that this association between religion and the written word is not only true for Africa but for Europe as well. In Europe religious orders were the first purveyors of literacy and book learning.

The fact that these religious scholars and missionaries were predominantly male rather than female begins to show how men became “wired” to the written word. In Africa it was these men of religion who were largely responsible for fashioning and deciding what the acceptable written forms of African languages were to be (Vail, 1989). In this way, social and culturally, the written word has evolved to become male than female and as a result men have become “genetically” closer to writing than women. I will return to this point later on.

Much of what has been written by feminists about science in particular, in my view, applies to academia in general and not just to science. First, education (and not just science) has been both a source and a locus of gender inequalities. Academia in Kenya has a long history of excluding women and there has been considerable marginalization of women and gender historically in education. When girls and women are not marginalized they are treated in ways that help to reproduce gender-normative stereotypes.

With regard to science, Code (1991; 1993) argues that many of the epistemological ideals that inform science are androcentric in origin. According to Code the problem is that the sciences are not just superficially or inadvertently androcentric but that they are fundamentally sexist. The argument that I am making is that there is a parallel in this with regard to the “technology” of writing; that it is not just androcentric by accident but that it is so by design.

As feminists have argued, those areas of knowledge that are male dominated have certain social mechanisms that seek to ensure that they remain male preserves or male-dominated. One such instance to me seems to be in the field of academic writing. This kind of writing has certain rules that may not always seem to make sense until one looks at them in this light; as an attempt to exclude; and not just women in this case but also “unschooled” men. So the writing style favoured in the social sciences in particular, has been derided by George Orwell as not being English at all! The attempt is to make knowledge obscure to the uninitiated.

So that when George Orwell (1946) decries what has happened to the English language, the errors of modern English are not just academic in origin but, in my view, are also male-created because they are in writing. His classic parody of this “modern” English characterizes in many ways what we are likely to find in much academic writing.

For the reader who may not be familiar with the piece, Orwell renders a verse from the book of Ecclesiastes in the *Holy Bible* in what passes for this modern English. The Bible verse reads as follows:

I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all (Ecclesiastes 9:11, The New King James Version).

In “modern” English:

Objective considerations of contemporary phenomena compel the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibit no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account.

As feminists argue, the whole scholarly enterprise has been dominated by men and it is therefore not a surprise that the rules of scholarship and academic writing are patriarchal. The rules of writing are Man-made and may therefore not necessarily resonate to the “wiring” of women as compared to men. This argument is further reinforced by how men and women have related to the written word in Kenya.

How men and women relate to writing in Kenya

For reasons that I have already explained, in Africa in general and in Kenya in particular, men have been in much longer contact with the written word than women. The introduction of Western formal education by missionaries in Kenya in the nineteenth century was geared towards converting Africans to Christianity and the first targets of these efforts were boys and men rather than girls and women. For various reasons (and they are many) men therefore had a head start in interacting with the written word. They were taught the written word by other men.

The education of girls, on the other hand, did not follow until several decades later and even then not to as a large a scale as it had been for boys. And as Allman, Geiger and Nakanyike (2003) have observed, while boys were trained for the public domain, women were trained to be homemakers. Indeed it is only within the past two decades that access to formal education system has become more or less equal for boys and girls of school-going age in Kenya. The point is that the same gene-culture coevolution that characterized interaction with the written word in Europe followed the missionaries into Africa and it has persisted to a greater or lesser extent to this day.

Kahn and Onion (2016) in their examination of some 600 published works of popular history from 80 publishing houses in the United States found that nearly 76 per cent of the titles were written by male authors. Biographies represented 21 per cent of the total number of books and some 72 per cent of the subjects of these biographies were male. While they found that some 13 per cent of the biographies of men were written by female authors, only six per cent of the biographers of women were men. Sixty-nine per cent of the biographies of women were written by women authors.

This led Kahn and Onion to the conclusion that there was some relationship between the gender of biographers and the gender of the subjects. And it was clear to them that the popularity of biographies of presidents and sports heroes reflected and reinforced the notion that interesting lives are lived in public (read male) and is often defined by conflict and glory. What I can add to this is to merely point out that it is not coincidental that the overwhelming majority of biographers are men. For the purpose of this discussion I now want to summarise the effect of cultural evolution in relation to speech and writing before considering genetic evolution.

Cultural evolution

Apart from the obvious fact that physically men and women are constructed differently there are yet more subtle differences. Feminist theorists have long drawn to our attention the fact that socially, men and women are “wired” differently. And it seems to me that a good place to begin explaining this difference is in the social power relations between men and women insofar as the written word is concerned. Whereas the spoken word may be conceived of as being female in social origin and shape as I have already suggested, the written word may be regarded as male in origin and shape and therefore bears the patriarchal imprint that characterizes Kenya’s cultures. In other words, that while both men and women are more or less “wired” to speak, men are more “wired” to write than women and this bias has been transmitted culturally through the generations.

Genetic Evolution

As a result of the foregoing I argue that men are genetically closer to writing than women because of the social and cultural evolution of writing. Not being a biologist I do not wish to make too many mistakes so I will be brief!

Various studies have shown that far from removing humans from the evolutionary fray, our cultural environments may exert selective pressures and thus may be implicated in the ongoing evolution of our physiological natures (Richerson & Boyd, 2005). For example, dairy farming, thought to have developed somewhere between 6,000 and 8,000 years ago, appears to have created a selective environment that facilitated the proliferation of lactose tolerance in those populations where it was practiced.

Lactose persistence seems to have evolved only among dairying populations in Europe, Africa and the Middle East. The pure cultural availability of milk changed the selective environment, favouring those with the genetic ability to take advantage of this novel source of food (Richerson & Boyd, 2005).

Thus, although humans change their culture, cultures also change humans on the genetic level. That is to say that cultures themselves form a major part of our selective environments (Laland, Smee, & Myles, 2010). These sorts of processes are captured by models of gene-culture coevolution that explore the ways in which cultural changes, adaptive or otherwise, can affect genetic evolution, and vice-versa.

This second system of inheritance created by cultural evolution can alter both the social and physical environments faced by evolving genes, leading to a process termed culture-gene coevolution. Empirical evidence from genetics suggests that culture has long shaped our genome (Laland, 2010). Overall, much theory and evidence now converge to indicate that we are an ultra-cultural species – unlike any other – whose brains, genes and biology have long been shaped by the interaction between cultural and genetic evolution. Culture appears to have opened up entirely new evolutionary vistas not available to less cultural species. It is this approach that is termed dual inheritance or gene-culture coevolution (Henrich, 2011).

Gene expression is the process by which the instruction in our DNA is converted into a functional product such as a protein. It is a tightly regulated process that allows a cell to respond to its changing environment.

We now largely accept the notion that our behavior is a result of both inherited and environmental influences and there is a growing appreciation that social information can in turn impact brain gene expression and behavior. To go even further, variations in our behavior can shape the evolution of genomic elements that influence social behavior through feedback of natural selection.

We humans engage in many activities in the course of our daily lives as we seek to reproduce our social lives. Speaking and writing are two such activities. These activities become “social” when they involve interaction between two or more people. Thus, while speech is more likely to be social, writing is rarely social.

At one time it was thought that the genome was a relatively passive blueprint of organismal development. However, recent research suggests that genomes are in fact highly responsive throughout life to a variety of stimuli that are associated with social behavior (Henrich, 2011). This is to say that social information can lead to changes in the brain and in behavior through effects on the genome.

Research demonstrates that social connectivity can affect gene expression to significantly change behavior and even health (Nicholson, 2014). Because we live in an incredibly complex social world that is constantly changing, often in unpredictable ways, it makes sense that our genes also have the ability to change rapidly in response to these social changes. As Robinson, Fernald and Clayton (2008) argue, genes do not specify behavior directly but encode molecular products that build and govern the functioning of the brain through which behavior is expressed.

Robinson, Fernald and Clayton (2008) argue that all systems of social behavior have the following characteristics:

1. They are not only sensitive to but are responsive to social and environmental information;
2. This information is transduced within individual organisms by one or more primary sensory pathways;
3. The transduced neural signals are processed and integrated in specific circuits of the brain via conserved signal transduction and neuromodulating systems; and
4. The resulting internal state of the animal ultimately controls behavior activity.

While every cell in our body contains all of our 22,000 genes, only some of them will be “expressed” and influence the activity of the cell. This is to say that these genes can be “switched” on and off and thereby change the activity of the cell in question (Nicholson, 2014).

In many animal societies, dominance hierarchies structure all social interaction. The fact that Kenyan society is basically patriarchal means that patriarchy permeates academia and I have tried to show how this affects speech and writing of men and women at Kenyatta University. Further, the variations to these general trends can then be explained by selective environmental pressures that affect each individual as a result of their individual biography and the social and cultural contexts in which they find themselves.

As Robinson, Fernald and Clayton (2008) note, although some progress has been made in understanding the specific relationship between genes and social behavior in a few species, it is early days yet to making any definite conclusions. First, the sheer diversity of species that need to be studied is a big challenge. Second, the molecular path linking genes and social behavior is quite complicated. Third, the

study of social behavior, encompassing interaction and communication that are not always easy to study adds an extra layer of complexity.

Verbal speech as a free space for women

In a patriarchal society, men lay down the “rules of the game” in virtually all aspects of the culture. Thus, in a world where the rules of writing do not resonate with their wiring, verbal speech becomes an area of relatively more freedom for women than writing. I am not suggesting that they have free rein here; only that they enjoy relatively more freedom when you compare it with the rules of writing that are more easily enforceable.

According to Carnes (2015) communication can be either verbal or nonverbal. Although nonverbal communication is more immediate it is also more ambiguous than verbal communication and men and women differ significantly in how they use nonverbal communication as well as their interpretation of it.

Research already demonstrates that there are clear disparities between men’s and women’s nonverbal behaviour, more particularly with what is called “nonverbal immediacy” or those behaviours that create psychological closeness between people (Santilli & Miller, 2011). The nonverbal immediacy includes eye contact, smiling, direct body orientation, close proximity, gesturing, vocal inflection, and physical contact while communicating. Santilli and Miller (2011) aver that generally women are more accurate than men at reading this sort of nonverbal communication and they are more likely to use such behaviour than men.

Some scholars have pointed out that this repertoire of nonverbal behaviour that is associated with women is considered to be typical of what is called low power communication. That is to say that women’s nonverbal behaviour communicates a lack of social power. This demonstration of lack of social power reflects their status in a patriarchal society and this may be a reason why women news anchors are becoming more common on Kenya’s television screens.

It is well known that one reason that men and women differ in their use of nonverbal communication is because their reasons for communication are often different. Men generally communicate to transmit information and to solve specific problems. This can be easily done through writing. It is simple to state clearly these kinds of things through writing.

Women on the other hand use communication to express feelings and to achieve emotional intimacy; things that are not necessarily verbal or that can be reduced to writing. So, even as women are better than men at using and interpreting nonverbal messages men are more likely to write better than women. I am drawing a parallel that in speech women adopt a low power strategy (that is non-threatening to men). On the other hand, men because of their needs, rely on high-power communication that includes writing.

Through verbal speech women find ways of expressing themselves in a way that makes more sense to them and it is not always in the way that the male-dominated academic writing would necessarily approve if the content of such speech were reduced to writing. Nonetheless it represents a free space that patriarchy has not found a way yet to dominate completely.

Why then are men still counted as the foremost orators?

Now that I have repeatedly asserted that women are better speakers where are the great women orators? A quick search on Google produces a list of ten of the greatest orators in history and not a single one of them is a woman. Where are the women?

According to Wikipedia (2016) an orator or oratorist or even oratorian is a public speaker; “one who orates”. In ancient Rome the art of public speaking was highly valued and was a professional competence expected of politicians and lawyers. The ancient Romans regarded the Greeks of that time as the masters in this field (as they were also in the fields of science, philosophy and many others). And so they either sent their sons to be trained in this field (as was the case with the young Julius Caesar), or engaged a paid teacher or a slave. So, in the West at least, we see a clear tradition of oration as a male field.

So we may say that when it comes to the field of such oratory, women are missing because of the socio-political nature of patriarchy that blocks their rise to prominent positions in which they can give orations worthy of note; patriarchy preserves such roles to men rather than women.

Historically the oration was not just spoken; sometimes it was reduced to writing. Now, of the odd 50 greatest orators of all time as listed in the Wikipedia article that I have just referred to, there are only two women: Margaret Thatcher who was Prime Minister of Britain and Sojourner Truth (1775-1875) a black woman born into slavery in New York State. Both women clearly managed to come out of the gender-normative arenas ascribed to women of their societies and times.

Writing is a powerful and often prestigious medium in Africa and elsewhere. Like all powerful and prestigious things in a patriarchal society it should not be surprising that writing and more particularly publishing is dominated by men. However, as predicted by gene-culture evolution theory, as social circumstances change we can expect things to change with regard to the status of women vis-à-vis men with regard speech and writing. This may well explain why exceptions to my general observations occur; due to differences in genetic make-up and different social and cultural contexts in which men and women may find themselves.

Conclusion

I have tried to show that gene-culture coevolution has favoured men in relation to writing. Patriarchal society and culture has ensured the persistence of a division of labour that has kept the written word largely as a male domain. This division of labour has been so pervasive and far-reaching that it has had an effect at the genetic/physical level. And it is this gene-culture coevolution that explains why at Kenyatta University at least, women speak better while men write better. What is your own experience?

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