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GENDER-BASED LINGUISTIC VARIATIONS: THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RAYA AND  
AGAME TIGRIGNA SPEAKERS IN SOUTHERN AND SOUTH - EASTERN TIGRAY

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at investigating the gender based - linguistic variations between male and female Tigrigna speakers of Raya and Agame. In order to achieve the objectives, the researcher used both open-ended and close-ended questions for the subjects. The questionnaire focuses on the participant's age and gender. Moreover, the research is based on a sample population of 120 informants of different sexes and ages (between 15 -80) years old and different levels of education. In both study areas 60 respondents from Raya and 60 from Agame respectively have been given the questionnaire. Moreover, recording is one of the methods of data collection for getting of accurate data, especially among old people who were unable to write their answers for the questions. The findings of this research work show that there is a wide difference between males and females in constructing and using language. The findings also indicate the socio-cultural factors behind using language differently.

Key Words: women's language, men' language, politeness, taboo, socio-cultural factors, masculine domination,

1. Introduction

According to Haylay (2009), most studies in gender and language use focused in identifying differences between the language style of women and men. The focus of such studies is on aspects of conversational style, such as topic choice, topic shifting strategies, the use and function of tag questions, the use and distribution of interruptions, and silence, questions politeness and so on. According to Holmes and Meyerhoff (2003), gender arises over time in the societal interaction. Language is an asset which can indicate different features of one's social identity. These features involve variation of language in an interaction. Women and men do not deliberately select linguistic choices for the purpose of generating masculine or feminine identities in societal interaction; instead, they establish gendered linguistic approaches to accomplish pragmatic usage of language.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Male and Female Speech Features

According to Haas (1979), perhaps the widespread belief about men's speech as compared with women's is that it is rougher and straighter. An observer of style in language, Jespersen (1922) says, women's observed speech is to be generally more conservative than men's in the following ways: Men are prepared to

invent and apply unfamiliar terms, witticism, utter colloquial expressions, and employ vulgar expressions and obscenity. Women, on the contrary, are not assertive of mentioning certain parts of the human body and certain natural functions by the straightforward and often impolite denominations which men, and particularly young men, prefer when speaking among themselves.

Wardhaugh (1986) says, another interesting claim is that in cross-gender conversations men frequently interrupt women but women much less frequently interrupt men (Zimmerman and West, 1975). James and Clarke (1993) looked at fifty-four studies that addressed the claim that men are much more likely than women **“To use interruption as a means of dominating and controlling interactions.”** They report that the majority of studies have found no significant differences between genders in this respect and both men and women interrupt other men and women. However, according to James and Clarke, ‘A small amount of proof exists that females may use interruptions of the collaborative and harmony-building type to a greater extent than do males, at least in some situations.’ Women try to coordinate, but men attempt to subordinate.

As mentioned by Sunderland (2006), there are obvious cultural differences between subgroups in whether men consider certain manners of language suitable for dealing with women. According to Ball (2003), men are more likely to interrupt the subject matter, shift and take longer turns. Thus, this is typically seen as evidence that men control dialogs. As Coulmas (1998) demonstrated, males who have the same position apply strong influence on their members to use the colloquial; this is because of their inclination to delimit themselves from women. As Wardhaugh (1986) states, men’s speech usually provides the norm against which women speech is judged.

### 3. Research Questions

The central theme of the study is to analyze and describe the gender-based linguistic variations between female and male Tigrigna speakers of Raya and Agame. So, the following strands of research inquiries arise from this general theme. These are;

- Are there gender-based linguistic variations between female and male Tigrigna speakers of Raya and Agame?
- What are the socio-cultural factors that affect the language use difference of the genders in Raya and Agame?

### 4. Methodology

#### 4.1 Population and Research Participants

The target groups selected as key respondents for the purpose of this particular study have been female and male Tigrigna speakers of Raya and Agame. The selection of these speakers as the source of data was intentionally performed. The participants of this study ranged in ages from 15-80 years old. Thus 60 informants were selected from the three districts of Raya namely Ofla, Kilisha and Tao and 60 respondents from Agame districts such as Ganta Afeshum, Enda weizero and Sindeda.

#### 4.2 Instruments of data collection

The researcher used both open-ended and close-ended questions for the subjects in order to identify gender-based linguistic variations of men and women in Agame and Raya. The questionnaire focuses on the participant’s age and gender.

The research is based on a sample population of 120 informants of different sexes and ages (between 15 -80) years old and different levels of education. Moreover, recording is one of the methods of data collection for getting accurate data, especially among old people who are unable to write their answers for the questions. The interaction of the people has been recorded without the awareness of the participants.

The sample is classified into three sub-categories of age. In both study areas 60 respondents from Raya and 60 from Agame respectively have been given the questionnaire. It has been shown in the following table.

**Table 4.1Age /gender sampling of informants**

Age group	Male	Female	Total
From 15-25 years old (young and adolescent)	20	20	40
From 26-50 years old (adults)	20	20	40
From 51-80 years old (elder informants)	20	20	40
Total	60	60	120

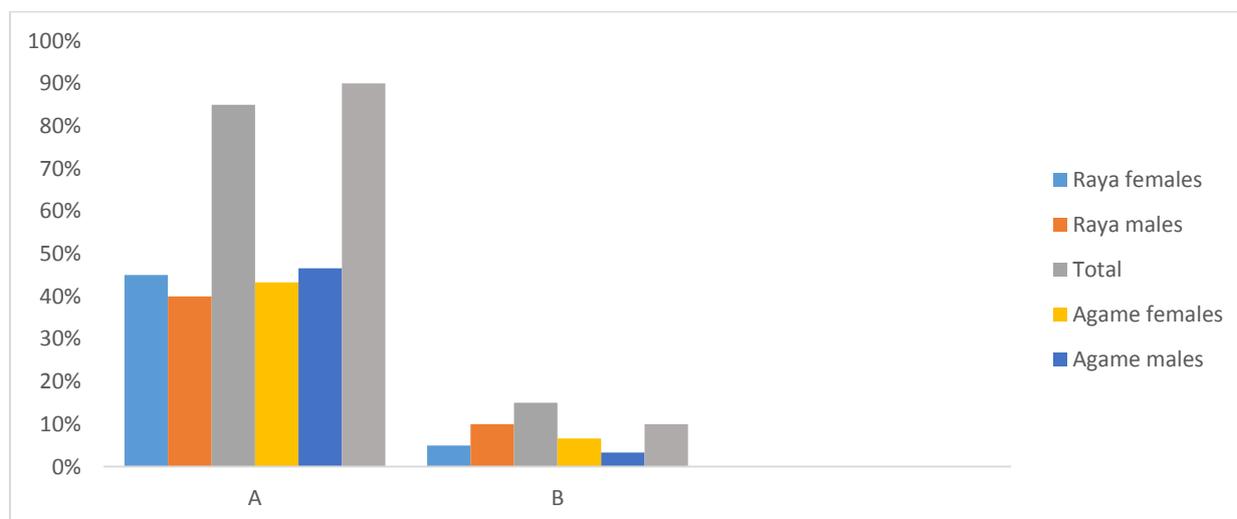
## 5. Questionnaire Analysis

Throughout the questionnaire, there are two parts. The first one focuses on the participants' age and gender. The second part of the questionnaire consists investigating their opinion towards gender differences in language use. Besides, the respondents were given the opportunity to write their comments and suggestions. The researcher also tried to see their views concerning social factors that affect language user differences based on gender.

1. Is there a language use difference between women and men?
  - A. Yes
  - B. No
  - C. Comments

**Table 5.1 Language use differences between women and men**

Suggestion	Raya females	Raya males	Total	Agame females	Agame males	Total
A	27	24	51	26	28	54
B	3	6	9	4	2	6
Total	30	30	60	30	30	60



**Figure 5.1 Language use differences between women and men**

The above table indicates that most of the informants (85% and 90%) in Raya and Agame respectively responded that there is gender-based language difference in their speech communities. 15% and 10% informants in Raya and Agame respectively responded there in no gender related language variation at all.

According to the informants in Raya and Agame Tigrigna speakers, males are observed to use languages that express male gender dominating situations in their speech communities. Males are relatively free to use the so called linguistic taboos and slang expressions in both Raya and Agame speech communities. The females of Raya and Agame, on the other hand, tend to use polite and taboo free languages relative to their male counter parts. Females are more conservative in their language use than males in Raya and Agame. The reasons that brought this linguistic variation in both speech communities are believed to be the social, economic, cultural and educational statuses of the speech communities which are dominantly influenced by males in Raya and Agame. Therefore, we can conclude that there is gender-based language variation.

Mcquiston and Morris (2009) say, men are more likely to use commands in an interaction for instance, "Do this now ... " and particular quantity such as, " ... and get all ten done by two o'clock." Women, on the contrary, are more likely to use fragmentary statements such as, "Let me see ... I think I have to." and indirect sentences for instance, "Have you thought about doing this now?"; Quina, Wingard and Bates, 1987). Women are also more likely to use politeness expressions for example, "May I have that report this afternoon?", whereas men, as indicated above, are more likely to state commands like, "I need the report by the end of the day"; Mulac, Winemann, and Widenmann et al. 1988).

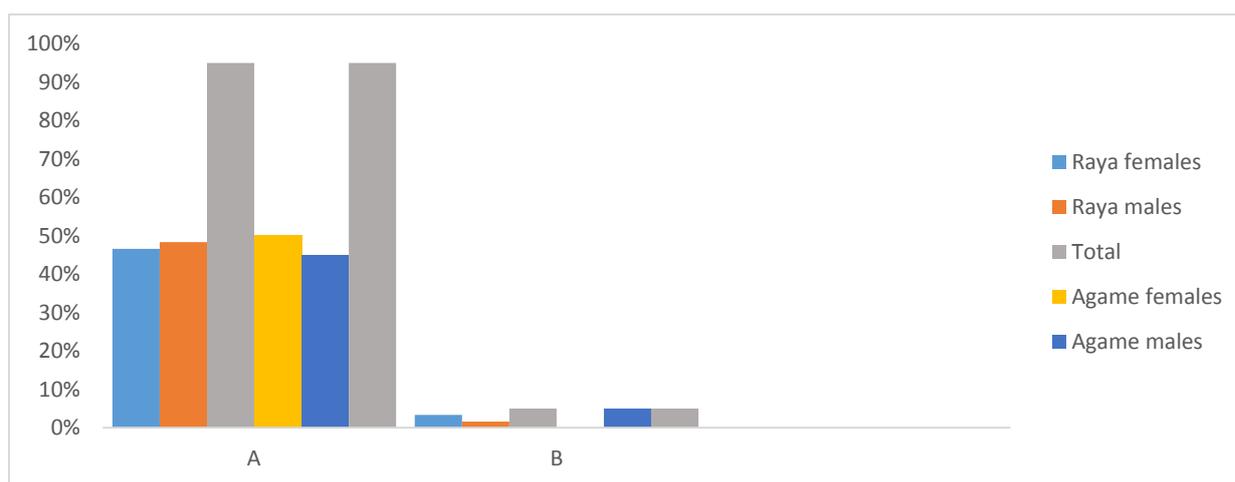
Mills (2003) contests the view that women are politer than men. She says that *“Politeness’ is not a property of utterances; it is rather ‘a set of practices or strategies which communities of practice develop, affirm, and contest”* (Mills 2003: 9.)

2. Do you think that the socio-cultural factors affect the language use differences between the genders?

- A. Yes
- B. No
- C. Comments

**Table 5.2 The socio-cultural factors affect the language use differences between the gender**

Suggestion	Raya females	Raya males	Total	Agame females	Agame males	Total
A	28	29	57	30	27	57
B	2	1	3	-	3	3
Total	30	30	60	30	30	60



**Figure 5.2 The socio-cultural factors affect the language use differences between the genders**

As it can be observed in the table above, most of the informants in Raya and Agame (95%) respectively stated that socio-cultural factors play an observable gender-based language variation. On the contrary, 5% of informants in Raya and Agame respectively responded against this view.

This variation is brought by the culture of the speech communities. In this case, it is culture that has been playing its role in shaping the language use differences between males and females in Raya and Agame. In Raya and Agame, females are shaped so that they cannot freely use their language like their male counterparts. Females who are observed to use their language the way their males do are not socially accepted. For example, it is shame for females to use some taboo expressions, but males feel relatively free to use taboo words. As a result, the degree of social criticism is higher in females who use taboo expressions than males which contributes to the gender based linguistic variations in Raya and Agame.

As it is mentioned above, language is *“A social phenomenon”* (Graddol & Swann, 1989:4.) Graddol and Swann argue that *“A language has an existence outside of ourselves”* (1989:5.) Besides, some linguists also believe that the differences of language between men and women are not necessarily linked to gender but linked to social surroundings. So, language can be influenced by the social factors, mainly by culture. Moreover, linguist Curran believes that *“Language is a medium of socialization. Essentially as a child learns the language of his or her culture, he or she is also learning how to think and behave as a member of that culture”* (Curran 1999) Linguistically speaking, females and males learn from their early childhood, how to behave like girls and boys, and how to become feminine and masculine.

3. Do you think that level of education and age influence the language use of the genders?

- A. Yes
- B. No
- C. Comments

Table 5.3 Level of education and age as factors of language use difference between the genders

Suggestion	Raya females	Raya males	Total	Agame females	Agame males	Total
A	24	21	45	20	26	46
B	6	9	15	10	4	14
Total	30	30	60	30	30	60

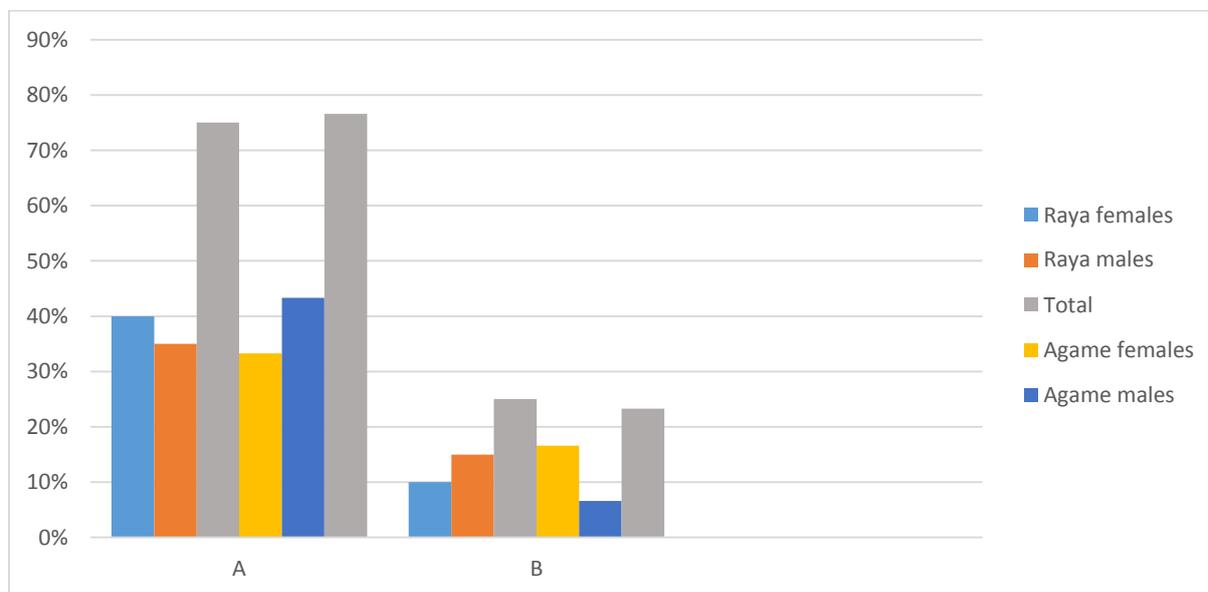


Figure 5.3 Level of education and age as factors of language use difference between the genders

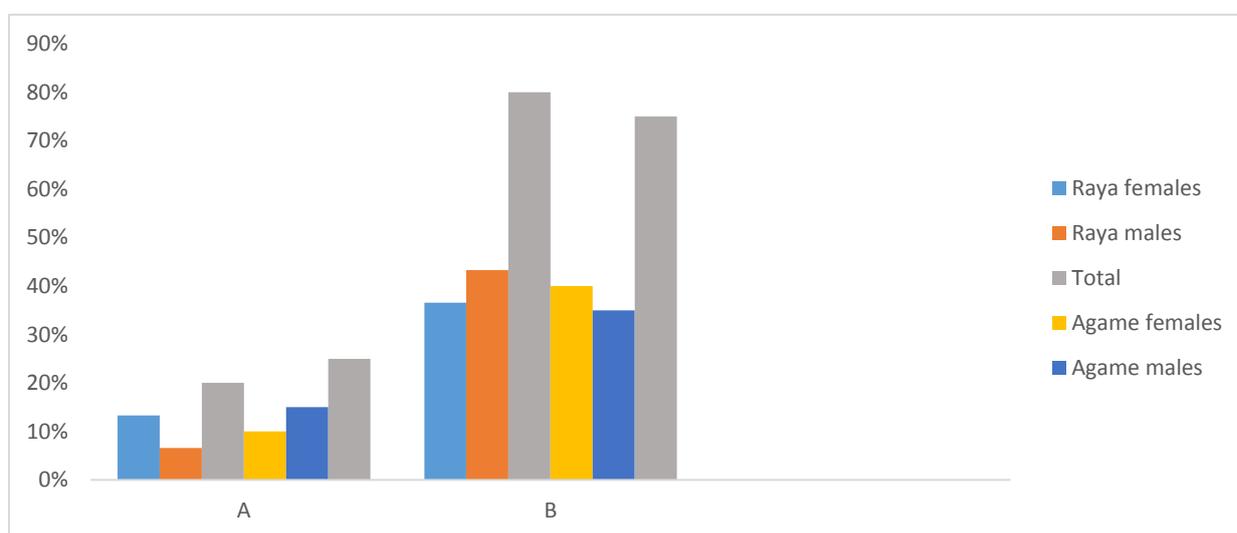
Regarding age and education levels, the above table shows that most of the informants in Raya and Agame (75% and 76.6%) responded age and education levels bring language use variations. Some 25% and 23% informants in Raya and Agame respectively say age and education level has nothing to do with language variations in their speech communities.

Relating to educational level, the culture of the speech communities of Raya and Agame seem to decrease the masculine domination over their female’s counter parts. The educated females are observed to be released from the linguistic criticism of the speech communities in Raya and Agame. This can also bring about the narrowing of differences in language use freedoms in females and males in Raya and Agame. Moreover, in both of the speech communities, the increase in age level brings about the uses of very formal linguistic expressions in both genders. Therefore, this can also decrease the gap of language use between females and males in Raya and Agame.

4. In your point of view, does the biological nature of women prevent them from using some expressions in their daily life which are employed by men?
  - A. Yes
  - B. No
  - C. Comments

Table 5.4 Biological nature of women as a factor in language use

Suggestion	Raya females	Raya males	Total	Agame females	Agame males	Total
A	8	4	12	6	9	15
B	22	26	48	24	21	45
Total	30	30	60	30	30	60



**Figure 5.4 Biological nature of women as a factor in language use**

As shown in the table above, 80% and 75% of the informants in Raya and Agame respectively responded that the language use of females is not naturally shaped. 20% and 25% informants in Raya and Agame, on the other hand, say that nature matters for females in the way they employ language.

We can, therefore, say that the biological set up of females has nothing to do with the language they produce relative to their males based on the above data. This implies that females are not different in their language use from males because they are biologically females, but this variation is because they are socially females in the speech communities of Raya and Agame. As it is stated by Wardhaugh (1986), women differ in the types of language they employ, because men and women often perform noticeably different roles in society. We may consider that the more different the roles, the greater the variations. And there seems to be some evidence to support such a claim, for the greatest differences appear to exist in societies in which the roles of men and women are most clearly differentiated. Since boys are brought up to behave like men in societies and girls behave like women, the differences are also perpetuated.

5. In your point of view, who are more talkative?

- A. Men
- B. Women
- C. Comments

**Table 5.5 The Frequency of Language Use between the Genders**

Suggestion	Raya females	Raya males	Total	Agame females	Agame males	Total
A	22	26	48	23	29	52
B	8	4	12	7	1	8
Total	30	30	60	30	30	60

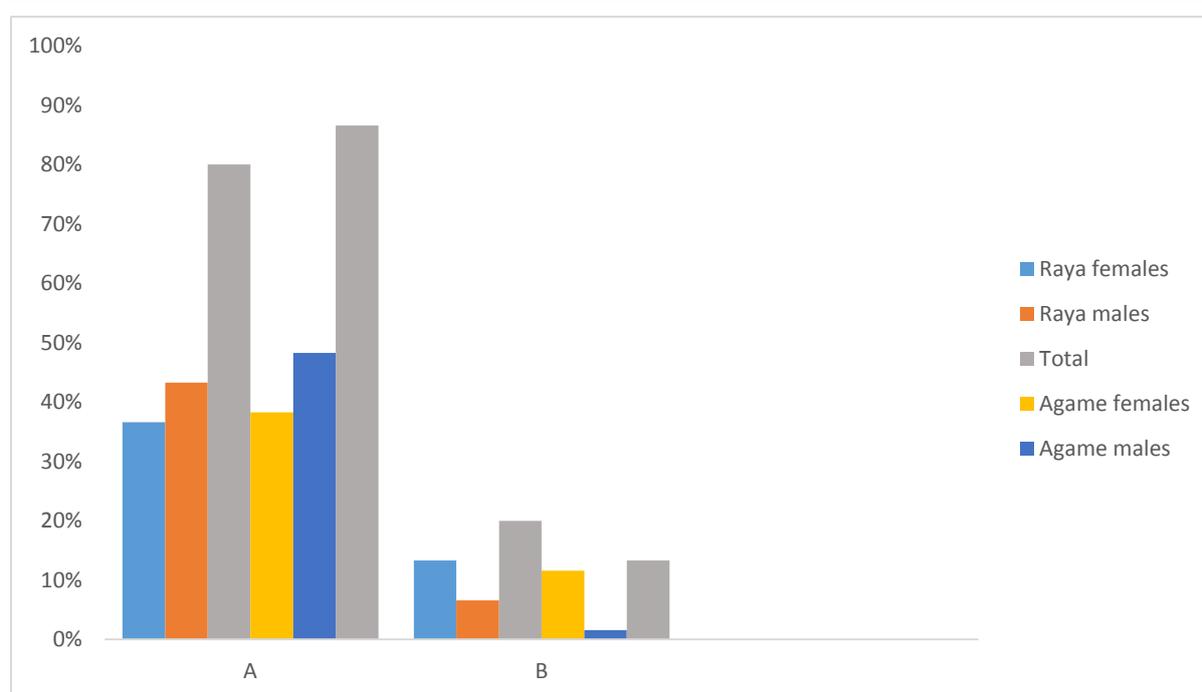


Figure 5.5 The Frequency of Language Use between the Genders

As we can see from the table above, 80% and 86.6% of the respondents in Raya and Agame respectively say males speak more than females, but 20% and 13.3% informants responded the reverse in Raya and Agame. This indicates that more freedom is socially and culturally bestowed to the males than the females both in Raya and Agame Tigrigna speech communities. Moreover, the economic activities of the speech communities tend to give more freedom of mobility to the males than to their female counter parts. Females in Raya and Agame are most of the time, house wives. They have not the chance to meet several people to talk to outside. Let alone outside of their home, even if they speak more at home, females in Raya and Agame are socially criticized as talkative. Relatively speaking, males are not as bound as females are by culture and are socially influential to have freedom and exposure of languages uses in Raya and Agame speech communities. Weatherall (2002) says, the point that there is dominance in language use was a significant part of previous research on gender variations in speech styles. For example, one suggestion was that men used interruption as a way of applying their control over women in dialog. Another way in which power may be reflected in language use is the way people speak to each other. Men in general, are more likely to challenge customs of language and communication, because they are generally in more controlling positions than women. According to Coulmas (1998:88), ***“Men language is heard as evincing their toughness, lack of affect, competitiveness, independence, competence, hierarchy and control.”***

### 5.1 Conclusions and recommendations

The findings of this piece of work show that there is a difference in pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax, conversational patterns and politeness strategies. Hence, these results prove that females are more likely to use polite and taboo free languages relative to their male counter parts. Moreover, females are more conservative in their language use than males in Raya and Agame. In other terms, female speakers have been found to use forms considered to be better or more correct than those used by men.

In addition, the findings also reveal that the variation is brought by the culture of the speech communities. In this case, it is culture that has been playing its role in shaping the language use differences between males and females in Raya and Agame. Another point that must be taken into account is that age and level of education play role in the language use difference between male and female.

From the above results, one might confirm that the use of language is connected to the society's norms and the individuals' attitudes which are controlled by these norms. Moreover, there are many other social factors which influence language use between both genders.

## 5.2 Recommendations

Based on the above conclusions, the researcher would like to forward the following recommendations:

Regarding language use disparity based on gender, the society unfairly gives more value to men than to women. Hence to change this unfair language usage in the society, awareness raising programs should be carried out in Raya and Agame speech community. Organizations such as Women's affairs office and others have to promote the concept of gender equality by preparing seminars, workshops and other media.

Further researches are necessary to explore the issue of gender and language in Tigrigna and other Ethiopian languages.

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