

# Honorific Affixes and the Preservation Shona People's Marriages

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## Abstract

Masvingo's local newspapers and records at the courts indicate a high increase in gender-based violence as well as divorce cases involving young couples in Masvingo urban area. It is apparent that most of the fights and divorce cases are over very insignificant issues which make most of the affected quick to regret immediately after. In an effort to come up with the reasons behind the increase as well as a possible solution, the paper reports on efforts to assess the contribution of the elimination of the honorific affixes in the affected couples' addresses. The research involved some qualitative analysis of data gathered through interviews carried within Masvingo urban area. Purposive sampling was done to select participants for the interviews which were basically modelled around the question: "What has destroyed the sacredness and calm that used to characterise the Shona marriage institution? It came out that the majority of the couples who fought or ended up divorcing addressed each other without using the honorific affixes. As a result the disagreements they usually cite arose from very simple things which ended up getting off hand due to the nature of the language of address in use. The research recommends some emphasis on love and respect between married people that is marked by the constant use of the honorific affixes at all costs.

**Keywords:** honorific affixes, divorce cases, gender-based violence

## Introduction

The honorific affixes are those prefixes and suffixes that contribute some element of respect in one's speech. In Bantu languages, the family to which the Shona language belongs, these come in various types. In Shona two main types will be discussed for this paper. Firstly, it is done through placing honorific prefixes to act as agreement markers on to the verbal complex. Shona NPs' occupation of the topical position in active sentences makes them the automatic controllers of agreement in Shona sentences. This agreement is explained by Dembetembe (1976) who asserts that if a noun phrase has its class feature copied on to the auxiliary in the structural change of the gender copying rule, that noun phrase is in a subject position. Stockwell (1977) also describes agreement rule as a type of constraint on the form of words occurring together, adding that it requires the form of one entity to be altered in order to match that of the one controlling agreement.

Włodarczyk and Włodarczyk (2006) also observe that, subjects govern agreement on the verb or auxiliary verb that carries the main tense of the sentence. Consider the underlined honorific prefixes meant to ensure agreement in the following Shona sentences:

1. Baba maenda kumba here?

Baba            ma-            end-            -a            kumba            here  
cl.1a 'father'   cl.6 AGR.   VR 'go'   TV            cl.15 'home'   'did'

"Father, did you go home?"

Even in the absence of the subject phrase, the honorific agreement marker would still show respect in the sentence. For instance;

2. Maenda kumba here?

ma-            end-            -a            kumba            here  
cl.6 AGR.   VR 'go'   TV            cl.15 'home'   'did'

"Did you go home?"

However, all this is only possible when there is use of subject phrases that show respect as the honorific prefix is always placed by the topical subject. If one uses a word like shamwari "friend" then the prefix on the verbal complex would never show any respect. This is because in most Bantu languages, Kawasha (2002) observes that the subject prefix is the one that is obligatorily marked on the verb as the forms of the verbal complexes are required to match the class, number and gender of the subject NP. For example, in example 1. baba "father" and the agreement marker ma- "has" share the features number, gender and class. This is the reason Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) comment that the subject has the grammatical function in a sentence of relating its constituent (usually a noun phrase) by means of the verb to any other elements present in the sentence, that is, objects, complements and adverbials. They argue that a subject in English typically matches two types of patterns: agreement and word order. However, in Shona the subject and the agreement marker must also share the aspect of respect. Hence, even where there is a subject referring to only one respected person, the singular feature is dismissed by the honorific affix as done in example 1 above.

To ensure the use of honorific affixes all the time, the Shona usually refer to each other using

respectful terms of address like totems (e.g. mukanya, madhube, moyondizvo, samaita, surnames with honorific affixes (e.g. VaMhute, VaChikava, VaChihera) as well as terms indicating the relationship between involved people (e.g. tezvara, mukuwasha, amai, Vamwene, vatete, baba, sekuru). All these terms would ensure the employment of the affixes in question which are believed to induce some sense of respect and politeness in the whole discourse.

Secondly, there is also use of honorific suffixes or enclitics in Shona. These are used in cases where an instruction is directed towards the respected person since in such environments prefixes may not be employed. For instance, one would have:

3. Baba endaj kumba  
Baba            end-        -a            -i            kumba  
cl.1a 'father' VR 'go'    TV        Hon. Suffix    cl.15 'home'  
"Father go home."

Again, even when the subject is an obvious or an old piece of information and happens to be left out, the suffix keeps the respect intact. For example, one can say;

4. Endaj kumba.  
end-        -a            -i            kumba  
VR 'go'    TV        Hon. Suffix    cl.15 'home'  
"Go home."

On the contrary, the honorific element is absent in the following example;

5. Enda kumba.  
end-        -a            kumba  
VR 'go'    TV        cl.15 'home'  
"Go home"

It is important to note that the English direct translation show no difference in all the examples. The respect demonstrated by the Shona versions is not reflected. Thus, unlike English, Shona is one of those languages that make the level of respect intended by the speaker evident.

### Position of the Honorific Affixes in Shona

In the Shona language, culture and tradition, respect is a major part of people's morals and values. Its absence would mean the person has reached his or her highest level of acculturation. If a child uses the 5<sup>th</sup> example presented earlier whilst addressing elders, the people would say *Mwana waniko asina hunhu* "Whose cultureless child is this." This means once the child demonstrates such a behaviour it would be pointing to the entire family's lack acceptable morals and values (Mhute, 2011). Parents would labour to inculcate the proper values to guard against damage to their reputation.

When a girl is being prepared for marriage, elders try their best to ensure the child would go and demonstrate the best morals and values. She would be expected to be a good ambassador for the family. For instance, they would be taught to respect all elders including the husbands as the husband is the family head and the wife is, therefore, bound to use these honorific affixes at all costs. It is also good practice for the husband, though he knows that he must be respected by everyone in the family, to try to make use of the affixes as well in order to demonstrate respect for his wife and children. This respect for each other would also make the children grow up in an environment where respect is so central. This kind of environment would ensure an element of calm even when there are some heated debates or discussions within the family.

### Findings

It came out that young couples of today, in the name of too much love for each other, modernity and the equal rights, show great interest in addressing each other by name and in most cases avoid at all costs the use of any of the honorific affixes that used to characterise the speeches of the previous generations' couples. At times the avoidance of the affixes in the homes become so much that it often results in the children also addressing their parents in the same way.

It also came out that if an argument against what the husband is lobbying for is launched by a wife without the use of the honorific affixes, it is likely that it will be easily mistaken for disrespect by the husband and, therefore, instil anger within the husband. It was established as well that whilst most of the people believe that the honorific affixes make speeches a bit polite, they are being despised by the younger generation as backward and outdated. Some ladies argued that the Shona culture was too oppressive as it encouraged women to address their husbands as *ishe* "lords". They regard it as a practice that has been misleading man into behaving like kings and behaving like monsters with their wives. Others argued that this is far from being acceptable nowadays as it used to demonstrate the kind of oppression that used to be exercised over Shona women and now there is equality in our society.

Asked about the causes for divorces and domestic fights, it came out that most of the affected's

arguments demonstrated that the misunderstandings mainly arose from the terms of address. Elderly men and women indicated that these young women no longer have any culture as they have not been taught the respect for their husbands as evidenced by their language of address. Other people indicated that it is all because of the lack of protection the children's marriages have from their ancestors due to the new religious beliefs.

### **Discussion**

The young Shona generation seem to have mistaken respect for backwardness, powerlessness and lack of knowledge. Whilst there seems to be nothing much in the terms of address, elders were very much aware that once you address someone without any respect, you become tempted to view the person without any respect. As a result, the so called love has since been treated as giving one the opportunity to do as they please whether they are married or not. It is this that has led to so much friction in the homes. The paper argues that the kind of emotions burning most of the younger generation's marriages come from the nature of the exchanged speeches. Absence of the honorific affixes tends to make people's closeness to each other more visible but once disagreement comes in then it will demonstrate the lack of any sacredness between them. They become quick to point at each other and even exchange blows as the language leaves no strings attached. On the other hand if you are addressing each other respectfully, it would not be very easy to ignore the respect and cross the boundary.

### **Recommendations**

The research recommends some emphasis on love and respect between married people that is marked by the constant use of the honorific affixes at all costs. There must always be caution before throwing away some of the communities' traditional features.

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