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Gender Exclusive Differences in Language Use

Abstract: *We are surrounded in our everyday lives by powerful commonsense ideas about speech which tell us that men and women communicate and use language in different ways. Nowadays, a major topic in sociolinguistics is the connection between language and gender. Gender differences in language use are of two types: gender-exclusive and gender-preferential, although some sociolinguists claim that the former is a myth and there are no gender-exclusive differences between the speech of men and women. The aim of this paper is to prove that these differences exist and that they are specific to traditional societies. Phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical differences will be discussed, it will be demonstrated that these gender differences really exist and that they are influenced by social factors.*

Key words*: language, gender, gender exclusive differences, men, women.*

1. Introduction

As early as the sixteenth century, English writers noted differences between men and women in terms of pronunciation and favoured the masculine form even when it was losing ground to the innovative form attributed to women. In 1568, Sir Thomas Smith complains about the affected speech of women and Richard Mulcaster in his *Elementarie* identifies a pair of gender-linked diphthongs, implying the superiority of the masculine, though it is the pronunciation attributed to women that has become standard in modern English:

> Ai [pronounced /ai/ as in *fine*], in the mans diphthong, and soundeth full: ei [pronounced /ei/, as in *faint*], the womans, and the soundeth finish in the same both sense, and use, a woman is deintie, and feinteh soon, the man feinteth not because he is nothing daintie. (quoted in Hornoiu 115)

This is a perfect example of the androcentric view of linguistic usage that points out women's speech as deviating from the (male) norms. Elyon in *The Governer* (1531) highlights that, gentlemen, as the educated literate group in society, differed in their use of language from women, the former's English being "sillable, as folisshe cleane, polite,

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perfectly and articulately pronounced, omittinge no letter as women often times do". (Elyon, quoted in Hornoiu 116).

In 1665 the French writer Rochefort described the language of the Carib Indians, who lived in the Lesser Antilles in the West Indies. He notes:

> The men have a great many expressions peculiar to them, which the women understand but never pronounce for themselves. On the other hand, the women have words and phrases which the men never use, or they would be laughed to scorn. Thus it happens that in their conversations it often seems as if the women had another language than the men. (quoted in Graddol and Swann 41)

Rochefort provides the following explanation for these differences:

> When the Caribs came to occupy the islands, these were occupied by an Arawak tribe which they exterminated completely, with the exception of the women, whom they married in order to populate the country. Now, these women kept their own language and taught it to their daughters…But though the boys understand the speech of their mothers and sisters, they nevertheless follow their fathers and brothers and conform to their speech from the age of five or six. (quoted in Jespersen 237)

Graddol and Swann (41-42) say that we shall never know if an invasion and subsequent slaughter of half of the population is the correct or true explanation for the linguistic differences discovered by Rochefort and other Europeans who mixed with the Carib community, but the idea that women and men might actually use different languages provoked quite a stir, and thus the Carib Indians have become a classic case in accounts of gender differences in language use.

Despite this interest, it does not seem as if the Carib male and female speech varieties were actually distinct enough to count as two separate languages. In 1922 Jespersen re-examined Rochefort's data and found that distinct male and female forms accounted for only about one tenth of the vocabulary items he had recorded.

Graddol and Swann (1989) further note that while the Caribs have often been seen as one of the most extreme examples of women and men using different language varieties, it is likely that some form of gender difference will be found in any language. Those differences that have been recorded occur at all linguistic levels: for example, they include use of different words, grammatical differences and pronunciation differences. In some cases these differences are categorical – men use one form whilst women another. In other instances they are a matter of degree – women use some features more than men, or the other way round.

According to Coates (10) commentary on gender differences in vocabulary is quite widespread in eighteenth-century writings, as demonstrated below. The following excerpt written by Richard Cambridge for *The World* of 12 December 1754 provides some insight into how women's language was perceived in those times:

> I must beg leave…to doubt the property of joining to the fixed and permanent standard of language a vocabulary of words which perish and are forgot within the compass of a year. That we are obliged to the ladies for most of these ornaments to our language, I readily acknowledge.

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(Cambridge 1754, quoted in Coates 10)

What Richard Cambridge is actually implying is that women's vocabulary is ephemeral and what they say is not important.

Lord Chesterfield, writing in *The World* of 5 December 1754, makes an observation regarding women's excessive use of certain adverbial forms:

> No content with enriching our language with words absolutely [*again the accusation that women destabilise the lexicon*] my fair countrywomen have gone still farther, and improved it by the application and extension of old ones to various and very different significations. They take a word and change it, like a guinea, into shillings for pocket money, to be employed in the several occasional purposes of the day. For instance, the adjective *vast* and it's [*sic*] adverb *vastly*, mean anything and are the fashionable words of the most fashionable people. A fine woman…is *vastly* obliged, or *vastly* offended, *vastly* glad or *vastly* sorry. Large objects are *vastly* great, small ones are *vastly* little; and I had lately the pleasure to hear a fine woman produce, by a happy metonymy, a very small gold snuff-box that was produced in company to be vastly pretty, because it was vastly little.

(quoted in Coates 11) (italics mine, C.O)

Language commentators have little trouble in identifying what they think to be women's words, though their lists are usually impressionistic and have little validity. An anonymous contributor to *The World* (6 May 1756) complains of women's excessive use of certain adverbial forms:

> Such is the pomp of utterance of our present women of fashion; which, though it may tend to spoil many a pretty mouth, can never recommend an indifferent one. And hence it is that there is so great a scarcity of originals, and that the ear is such a daily sufferer from an identity of phrase, whether it be vastly, horridly, abominably, immensely, or excessively, which, with three or four more calculated for the same swiss-like service, make up the whole scale or gamut of modern female conversation.

(quoted in Coates 11)

This characteristic of women's excessive use of adverbial forms is also found in 19th century literature. Jane Austen mocks it in her novel *Northanger Abbey* (1813), in the speech of Isabella Thorpe:

> 'My attachments are always excessively strong.'
>
> 'I must confess there is something amazingly insipid about her.'
>
> 'I am so vexed with all the men for not admiring her! – I scold them all amazingly about it.'

(Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, Ch. 6)

The use of adverbial forms of this type was very fashionable in those times, and was evidently associated with women's speech.

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Furfey (222), in an early review of women's and men's language, argues that the very existence of sex-differentiated forms implies:

> some consciousness of men and women as different categories of human beings. Furthermore, at least at some period in the history of language, this distinction must have been regarded as being of a certain consequence; for it would seem to be a general truth that the great categories of grammar are not based on distinctions regarded by the speakers as trivial.

Furfey (222) further notes that "language sometimes serves as a tool of sex dominance". Beyond this very general level, few satisfactory explanations were offered for sex differentiated forms in language.

We have seen that there are gender-related differences between the speech of men and women. We will now turn our attention to gender-exclusive differences and I will discuss some of the languages where these differences exist.

2. Gender exclusive differences in language use

Meyerhoff (202) points out that the so-called exclusive features are those which are used only by (or to) speakers of a particular sex. She further notes that in Māori (the Polynesian language spoken in New Zealand), the words for siblings provide information about both the referent and the speaker. For example, the word *teina* tells us that the speaker is referring to a younger sibling that is the same sex as the speaker is (younger brother for a male speaker, younger sister for a female speaker). If a man wants to refer to his sister, he would use a completely different word, *tuahine*, and this could refer to a younger or older sister.

Ochs (quoted in Meyerhoff 203) has described words like those above as a *direct index* of gender. Direct index means that a word has a semantic feature [+female] or [+male] as part of its basic meaning. Personal pronouns like *he* or *she* directly index gender.

Meyerhoff (204-205) says that there is one region where it seems that in a community women and men *do* use different languages, and this is the Vaupés, an area between Colombia, Peru and Brazil. The Vaupés is an area of great linguistic diversity, and according to the tradition one must marry outside the father's home language group. In the following section the Vaupés system will be discussed more thoroughly based on the research of Sorensen (1967) and Stenzel (2005).

2.1. Language and social identity in the Northwest Amazon

In an article entitled "Multilingualism in the Northwest Amazon", Sorensen first introduced the anthropological and linguistic communities to the fascinating sociolinguistic situation encountered in the Vaupés river basic of Brazil and Columbia, which he described

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as "a large, culturally homogenous area where multilingualism – and polylingualism in the individual – is the cultural norm"(Sorensen 671).

Stenzel (3) notes that multilingualism as it is encountered in the Vaupés system is the result of several complementary factors. A person's social identity is established by patrilineal descent and has language group affiliation as its primary marker. To quote Sorensen, these groups are:

> composed of those individuals who are expected to have used the language as their principal language when they were children in their nuclear family or orientation. The language that identifies the linguistic group is, then, at once the father tongue, the longhouse language, and the tribal language of each member. (Sorensen 671)

As we already know, language plays an important role in constructing an identity, but in the Vaupés context, this relationship is extremely important. Patrilineal descent and identification with one's father's language group form the foundation of social organization in the Vaupés, establishing boundaries between groups and imbuing in each individual an unalterable identity, as Stenzel (4) suggests. According to Jackson (164) "although everyone in the Vaupés system is multilingual, individuals identify with and are loyal to only one language, their father language", while Sorensen (677) claims that "an individual belongs to his (or her) father's tribe, and to his father's linguistic group, which is also his own".

This relationship established between the individual and a language group is reinforced by a number of social practices. One of these social practices is that "marriage entails the bride going to reside with her husband's group, often in her husband's natal community" (Stenzel 4).

Regarding language use, because no individual's language group affiliation ever changes – irrespective of where he or she may live – a married woman continues to identify with and use her own language with other in-marrying wives from her group. Sorensen (677) explains:

> A woman invariably uses the language of the longhouse – her husband's language – when talking directly with her children. But she is usually not the only woman from her tribe in a longhouse. In a longhouse of any size there are usually several women from other tribes; and during the course of a day, these several groups of women usually find occasion to converse with each other in their own original languages.

However, the children of a couple inherit the father's social identity (meaning that they belong to his language group) and all children from the age of five must switch to public use of their father's language. They are expected to become proficient speakers of and show loyalty to this language.

Stenzel (5) highlights that in the Vaupés social system there is a classificatory distinction between *agnates* and *affines*. The term *agnates* refers to members of one's own group, understood to be one's relatives, whilst the term *affines* refers to potential marriage partners, members of other groups. Marriage between agnates (that is, between sisters and brothers), is prohibited; one must marry outside of one's group to avoid it – thus is the principle of linguistic exogamy/exogamous marriage established.

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There are communities where the language is shared by women and men, but particular linguistic features occur only in women's speech or only in men's speech. These differences occur at the level of phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and the lexicon.

2.2. Phonological differences

Phonological differences between the speech of men and women have been noted in a variety of languages.

According to Coates (29), the Chukchi language, spoken in Eastern Siberia, varies phonologically depending on the gender of the speaker. Women use /ʃ/ where men use /ʧ/ or /r/. For example, the word 'people' is pronounced by women [ʃamkɪʃɪn] while men pronounce it [**r**amkɪʧɪn]. In his analysis of Chukchi, Borgoras (665) notes that women generally substitute /ʃ/ for /tʃ/ and /r/, particularly after weak vowels. They also substitute /ʃʃ/ for /rk/ and /tʃ/. The sounds /tʃ/ and /r/ are quite frequent so that the speech of women, with its ever-recurring /ʃ/ sounds quite peculiar, and is not easily understood by an inexperienced ear. Women can pronounce /tʃ/ and /r/ and when quoting the words of a man – for example in tales – they use these sounds. In ordinary conversation, however, the pronunciation of men is considered as unbecoming a woman.

Men's pronunciation	**Women's pronunciation**	**Glossary**
ra'mkitʃhin	ʃa'mkiʃʃin	'people'
tʃŭmña'ta	ʃŭmña'ta	'by a buck'
Pa'rkala	Pa'ʃʃala	'by a Parkal'
Tʃaivu'urgin	ʃaivu'uʃʃin	(a name)

Table 1. ***Phonological differences between the speech of men and women in Chukchi*** **(from Borgoras 1922)**

Borgoras further adds that men, particularly in the Kolyma district, drop intervocalic consonants, especially /n/ and /t/. In this case the two adjoining vowels are assimilated. Women say [*nitvaqe**n**at*] while men pronounce it [*nitvaqaat*]. It would seem that this process of elimination of intervocalic consonants has been very important in the development of the present form of Chukchi.

According to Wardhaugh (318) in Bengali, an Indo-European language spoken in India, men often substitute /l/ for initial /n/; women, children, and the uneducated do not do this. He further adds that in Yukaghir, a northeast Asian language, both women and children have /ts/ and /dz/ where men have /tj/ and /dj/. Old people of both genders have a corresponding /tʃj/ and /jj/. This proves that the difference is not only gender-related, but also age-graded, meaning that it is specific to a certain age. These differences are set out in the table below:

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MALE			FEMALE		
CHILD	ADULT	OLD	CHILD	ADULT	OLD
/ts/	/tʲ/	/ʧʲ/	/ts/	/ts/	/ʧʲ/
/dz/	/dʲ/	/ʤʲ/	/dz/	/dz/	/ʤʲ/

Table 2. ***Phonological differences between the speech of men and women in Yukaghir*** **(from Wardhaugh 2009)**

Another example of phonological differences is highlighted by Trudgill (68) in Darkhat Mongolian**,** a language spoken in Asia. The back rounded vowels /u/ and /o/ in men's speech correspond to the mid vowels /ʉ/ and /ø/ in women's speech, whereas male /ʉ/ and /ø/ correspond to female /y/ and /ø/ - front vowels. Although female speakers do not use /ʉ/ and /ø/ where male speakers use them, there is no taboo prohibition to prevent them from using these sounds in other cases.

According to Talbot (5-6) in Brazil there is a tribe called Karajá, whose language has more differences between male and female speech than any other language. In Karajá, the sex of the speaker is marked phonologically. There are systematic sound differences between male and female forms of words, even occurring in loan words from Portuguese. Some examples are provided in table 3 below:

Male speech	Female speech	Portuguese	English
heto	hetoku		house
out	kotu		turtle
bisileta	bisikreta	bicicleta	bicycle
nobiotxu	nobikutxu	domingo	Sunday

Table 3. ***Phonological differences in male and female speech in Karajá*** **(from Fortune and Fortune 1987, quoted in Talbot 2010)**

In the next section morphological differences will be discussed, based on the research of Ekka (1972), Fasold (1990) and Meyerhoff (2006).

2.3. Morphological differences

According to Fasold (89-90) there are languages where the sex of both the speaker and the hearer is important. A woman might use a different form when she is talking to another woman compared with when she is talking to a man, while a man might use a third form, with the exact meaning as the first two, irrespective of to whom he is addressing.

Such a language is Kūrux[2], a small-group Dravidian language spoken in India. In Kūrux, there are several morphological forms used by women only when addressing another

[2]For a more detailed analysis of the differences in the speech of men and women in Kūrux, see Ekka (1972).

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woman; they are not used by men or by women to address men. Some representative forms are given below in table 4.

TWO-WAY CONTRASTING FORMS BY GENDER IN KŪRUX		
Man speaking, any addressee; or woman speaking, man addressee	**Woman speaking Woman addressee**	**Gloss**
bardan	bar'en	I come
bardam	bar'em	We (my associates and I, but not you) come
barckan	barc'an	I came
barckam	barc'am	We (my associates and I, but not you) came
xaddar	xadday	children

Table 4. ***Morphological differences between the speech of men and women in Kūrux*** **(from Ekka 1972)**

These forms are the first-person singular and first-person plural exclusive verb paradigms, and the noun "children" in the plural.

Fasold further notes that "verb morphology in the second-person singular is even more sensitive to sex" (90). There is one form used by either men or by women when they are talking to men. When women are addressed there are two separate forms depending on the sex of the speaker. A man would use a different form to woman from what a woman would use to another woman, as illustrated below in table 5.

Man or woman speaker, man addressee	**Woman speaker, woman addressee**	**Man speaker, woman addressee**	**Gloss**
barday	bardin	bardi	you come
barckay	barckin	barcki	you came

Table 5. ***Morphological differences between the speech of men and women in Kūrux*** **(from Ekka 1972 and Meyerhoff 2006)**

Taylor (1951, quoted in Fasold 1990) illustrates another example, from Island Carib from the Caribbean nation, Dominica. In this language, there is a tendency for men to use the names of qualities, states, and actions as if they carried *feminine* gender while women treat them like *masculine* gender nouns. The expression "the other day", is *ligira buga* if a woman says it, but *tugura buga* if uttered by a man. Interestingly, Taylor reports that "perhaps a minority of men" regularly use feminine forms for non-concrete nouns but that "all women resort to this trick" when they are quoting conversations between men.

Another language in which there are morphological differences between the speech of men and women is Yanyuwa, an aboriginal language spoken in Australia. Here men and women really speak two different dialects. In his analysis of Yanyuwa, Bradley (14) says that the most common statement given by the Yanyuwa people in relation to their language

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is that "Men speak one way, women speak another, that's just the way it is!". Other people believe that they speak two different languages to show respect for the opposite sex. One individual claims that:

> I don't really know, but I was thinking that men and women have to respect each other, so we talk different ways and so we show respect for each other, just like ceremony; you know men have their ceremony and their language well the same way women have their own ceremony and their own language. (Bradley 14).

Bradley further notes that the younger generation of Yanyuwa people no longer speak this language so it is almost impossible to find out the way in which the Yanyuwa language was acquired by children. However, it seems that in very early childhood children spoke a form of neutral Yanyuwa, meaning that the dialectal markers were deleted from words, so that 'at or with the fire' became *Ø buyuka-la* rather than the correct *ji-buyuka-la* for women and *ki-buyuka-la* for men. In adolescence around the age of 12 boys are initiated through a series of rituals which culminate in circumcision, after which they are considered men and from that moment on they are supposed to speak the men's dialect. When a young Yanyuwa male uses Yanyuwa he often speaks the women's dialect, for which he is severely criticised. The following excerpt is part of a conversation between mother and son:

(1)

Son: Mum, did you buy *ni-warnnyi* [meat]?

Mother: Hey! Are you a man or a woman? Man got to talk *na-warnnyi* not *ni-warnnyi* that's women's talk, you got to talk properly, you not little kid now.

Son: Hey look you complain because young people don't talk language and when we do you got to laugh at us, man may as well not even bother.

Mother: Well, you just got to learn to talk proper way just like we did.

(from Bradley 15)

It is difficult for boys to start using the men's dialect because when they were born they acquired the women's dialect and after their initiation they have to forget that dialect and start speaking a completely different one.

In Yanyuwa, differences go beyond sounds and words and include pronouns, grammatical affixes (as illustrated above) and other parts of speech. Bradley (17) provides further evidence from songs cycles, where there are also female dialectal markers on common nouns and a number of verb stems from the female dialect. Consider the following examples:

(2)

Song verse

Manankurra 'At Manankurra

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kiya-alarri	He (a Shark Dreaming) stood’
Manankurra	*kiya-alarri*
Place name	he: stand

The prefix *kiya-* in the second line of the above verse is a women’s dialect prefix, while in the men’s dialect it is *ka-*.

(3)

Song verse

Warriyangalayani	‘The Hammerhead Shark’
ni-mambul ni-ngurru	makes spray with its nose’
Warriyangalayani	*ni-mambul ni-ngurru*
Hammerhead shark	its: spray its: nose

The prefix *ni-* in the second line is the female masculine form. In the male dialect it would be *na-*.

Holmes (158) claims that in traditional and conservative styles of Japanese, forms of nouns considered appropriate for women are frequently prefixed by *o-*, a marker of polite and formal style.

The following section deals with syntactic differences, based on the research of Meyerhoff (2006).

2.4. Syntactic differences

Meyerhoff (205) highlights that in Anejom̃, a language spoken in the Republic of Vanuatu, Oceania, speakers refer to a same-sex sibling with a possessive structure known as “direct possession”, for example, *etwa-k* ‘same.sex.sibling-my’, and an opposite-sex sibling with a subordinate construction, for example, *nataheñ erak* ‘sister-my’, *nataüañ erak* ‘brother-my’. Direct possession constructions are generally used with things like body parts (‘my hand’), or things over which we cannot control (‘my spirit’). Subordinate constructions are used with things that can be removed (‘my blood’, ‘its lid’).

However, there is an asymmetry in how speakers refer to a spouse. A man uses the direct possession construction to refer to his wife, *ega-k* (wife-my), but a woman uses a third construction, which is called “active possession”, to refer to her husband, *nataüñ uñak* ‘husband-my’.

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2.5. Lexical differences

According to Holmes (158) in some languages there are also differences between the vocabulary items used by women and men, though these are never very extensive. Traditional Japanese is a case in point:

Men's form	Women's form	Gloss
oyaji	Otoosan	'father'
hara	Onaka	'stomach'
umai	Oishii	'delicious'
kuu	Taberu	'eat'

Table 6. ***Lexical differences between the speech of men and women in traditional Japanese*** **(from Holmes 2008)**

Holmes further adds that in modern Japanese, these distinctions are more a matter of degrees of formality or politeness than gender; so that the men's forms are restricted to casual contexts and are considered to be macho or coarse, while the women's forms are used by everyone in public contexts.

In most languages, the pronoun system marks gender distinction in the third person singular (he/she). According to Talbot (2010), Coates (2004) and Holmes (2008), in Japanese there are a number of words for the personal pronoun 'I' varying primarily in formality, but women are generally restricted to the more formal variants. So, *ore* is used only by men in casual contexts and *boku*, another casual form is used almost entirely by men, while women are traditionally expected to use only the more formal forms, such as *atashi* and *watashi*, and the most formal one *watakushi*. There are also a number of words for the personal pronoun 'you'. These forms, as well as the forms for the first person pronoun 'I' are given in table 7 below:

	Men's speech	Women's speech
FIRST PERSON		
Formal	watakushi	watakushi
	watashi	atakushi
Plain	boku	watashi
		atashi
Deprecatory	ore	Ø
SECOND PERSON		
Formal	anata	anata
Plain	kimi	anata
	anta	anta
Deprecatory	omae	
	kisama	Ø

Table 7. ***Japanese personal pronouns*** **(from Coates 2004)**

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It is noticeable that certain forms are exclusive to men, for example *boku* (first person pronoun) and *kimi* (second person pronoun). The deprecatory pronouns *ore* (first person) and *omae* and *kisama* (second person) are also used exclusively by men. Women have no deprecatory forms. Another difference is that the pronoun *watashi* is formal for men, but plain for women. However, Talbot (5) claims that Japanese high school girls say that they also use the first person pronoun *boku*, because if they use *atashi* they cannot compete with boys. Feminists have been reported using the form *boke* to refer to themselves.

Coates (31) notes that for the Trobriand islanders[3] the kinship terms are organised on the basis of two criteria: (i) same/different gender as the speaker, (ii) older/younger than the speaker. For the word *sister*, the terms will vary if the speaker is male or female and if the speaker is younger or older than the sibling. In the case of the relationship we call *sister*, the Trobrianders have three different terms (*luguta*, *tuwagu*, *bwadagu*). So, they make no distinction between a man's sister and a woman's brother (the term used is *luguta*), nor between a man's brother and a woman's sister if the age is the same in both cases (*tuwagu* or *bwadagu*).

3. Conclusion

Throughout this paper we have seen that gender exclusive differences in language use really exist and that in some tribal societies men and women do speak differently. Gender-related differences in language have been recorded as early as the sixteenth century when the male language was seen as the norm. Nowadays things are not the same. The male language is no longer seen as the norm, due to the fact that female speakers prefer the prestige forms (i.e. the correct form) whilst men tend to use the vernacular forms. However, this thing does not apply to tribal societies where men use a language and women another. The differences are not only phonological but also morphological, syntactic and lexical.

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[3] The Trobriand Islands (officially known as the Kiriwina Islands) are an archipelago off the eastern coast of New Guinea. They are situated in Milne Bay Province in Papua New Guinea. The language of the Trobriand peoples is Kilivila, an Austronesian language, though various different dialects of it are spoken by each different tribe.

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