Gender Bias In Language Essay, Research Paper

Language is a very powerful element. It is the most common method of communication. Yet it is often misunderstood an misinterpreted, for language is a very complicated mechanism with a great deal of nuance. There are times when in conversation with another individual, that we must take into account the person’s linguistic genealogy. There are people who use language that would be considered prejudicial or biased in use. But the question that is raised is in regard to language usage: is the language the cause of the bias or is it reflective of the preexisting bias that the user holds? There are those who believe that the language that we use in day-to-day conversation is biased in and of itself. They feel that the term mailman, for example, is one that excludes women mail carriers. Then there are those who feel that language is a reflection of the prejudices that people have within themselves. That is to say that the words that people choose to use in conversation denote the bias that they harbor within their own existence. There are words in the English language that are existing or have existed (some of them have changed with the new wave of “political correctness” coming about) that have inherently been sexually biased against women. For example, the person who investigates reported complaints (as from consumers or students), reports findings, and helps to achieve equitable settlements is ombudsman (Merriam Webster Dictionary) (Ombudsperson here at Indiana State University). This is an example of the gender bias that exists in the English language. The language is arranged so that men are identified with glorified and exalted positions, and women are identified with more service-oriented positions in which they are being dominated and instructed by men. So the language used to convey this type of male supremacy is generally reflecting the honored position of the male and the subservience of the female. Even in relationships, the male in the home is often referred to as the “man of the house,” even if it is a 4-year-old-child. It is highly insulting to say that a 4-year-old male, based solely on his gender, is more qualified and capable of conducting the business and affairs of the home than his possibly well-educated, highly intellectual mother. There is a definite disparity in that situation. In American culture, a woman is valued for the attractiveness of her body, while a man is valued for his physical strength and his accomplishments (50). Even in the example of word pairs the bias is evident. The masculine word is put before the feminine word. As in the examples of Mr. and Mrs., his and hers, boys and girls, men and women, kings and queens, brothers and sisters, guys and dolls and host and hostess (52). This shows that the semantic usage of many of the English words is also what contributes to the bias present in the English language.Alleen Pace Nielsen notes that there are instances when women are seen as passive while men are active and bring things into being. She uses the example of the wedding ceremony. In the beginning of the ceremony, the father is asked who gives the bride away and he answers, “I do.” The problem here is that it is at this point that Neilsen contends that the gender bias comes into play. The traditional concept of the bride as something to be handed from one man (the father) to another man (the husband-to-be) is perpetuated (52). Another example is in the instance of sexual relationships. The women become brides while men wed women. The man takes away a woman’s virginity and a woman loses her virginity. This denotes her inability, apparently due to her gender, to hold on to something that is a part of her, and enforcing the man’s ability and right to claim something that is not his. To be a man, according to some linguistic differences, would be considered an honor. To be endowed by genetics with the encoding of a male would be as having been shown grace, unmerited favor. There are far greater positive connotations connected with being a man than with being a woman. Neilsen yields the example of “shrew” and “shrewd.” The word shrew is taken from the name of a small be especially viscous animal, however in Neilsen’s dictionary, a “shrew” was identified as an “ill-tempered, scolding woman.” In the same light, the word shrewd comes from the same root; however, it was defined as “marked by clever discerning awareness.” It was noted in her dictionary as a shrewd businessman” (52). It is also commonplace not to scold little girls for being ‘tomboys’ but to scoff at little boys who play with dolls or ride girls bicycles.In the conversations that come up between friends, you sometimes hear the words “babe,” “broad,” and “chick.” These are words that are used in reference to or directed toward women. It is certainly the person’s prerogative to use these words to reflect women, but why use them when there are so many more to choose from? Language is the most powerful tool of communication and the most effective tool of communication. It is also the most effective weapon of destruction. There are times when people use the language to validate whatever prejudices they may harbor. For years, Merriam-Webster Dictionary held as their primary definition for the word nigger something to the affect of ” term used to refer to persons of darker skin.” This proved to be true even after most other dictionaries changed the definition of nigger to mean an “ignorant or uninformed person.” Blacks directly felt this. The fact this notable dictionary continued to use as their definition this stereotype validated to the rest of the English speaking world that this was an appropriate reference to make when talking to or about Blacks. Even today, Merriam-Webster continues to use this definition as well as another that says that nigger means “a black person,” along with a definition that says a nigger is a “member of a group of socially disadvantaged persons.” But even in that, one cannot ignore the underlying prejudicial tones of that definition.Although there are biases that exist in the English language, there has been considerable change toward recognizing these biases and making the necessary changes formally so that they will be implemented socially. It is necessary for people to make the proper adjustments internally to use appropriate language to effectively include both genders. We qualify language. It is up to us to decide what we will allow to be used and made proper in the area of language. BibliographyPace Nielsen, Alleen. “Sexism in English: A 1990s Update.”1990. Rpt. In About Language. Eds. William H. Roberts and Gregoire Turgeon. 5th ed. Boston Houghton Mifflin, 1998. 49-59

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