Language and gender

This topic asks us to become more aware of language as an expression of gender identities. When we talk about gender in reference to language, we are referring to the way language embodies, reinforces, and creates a socially constructed notion of maleness or femaleness, in often complex relation to the biological construct of sex. In some ways, we could say that gender is in the mind, while sex is in the body. Male and female are considered to be sex-based categories, while femininity and masculinity are gender-based categories. Most studies of language and gender revolve around questions such as whether there IS a gender differentiation of language use, where it comes from, what forms it takes linguistically, and what effects it has on individuals and in society at large.

Guiding questions

1. How can language be gender-biased?
2. How does language reinforce stereotypes or culturally received ideas about what different genders do, and don't do, think and don't think?
3. Does language reflect our world, or does it create it? Is English really a non-sexist language because it has no masculine and feminine forms?
4. Is there a difference in the way men and women use language to achieve the same things? What are things that men can get away with saying but women can't (or vice-versa)?

Language and community

As we look at how language is used in various contexts, we see that people express allegiance to a particular community through language. A 'community' can mean many things. It may refer to a nation or a region, but it may also refer to a subculture or 'cult'. In fact one could argue that a community is defined by its use of language.

Guiding questions

1. How do people express their allegiance to a particular community through language?
2. How is language used to define a particular community?
3. What kinds of practices define a community?

Language and taboo

As we look at how language is used in various contexts, we see that some people are shocked or offended by certain forms of language. What constitutes acceptable use of language varies from culture to culture.

Guiding questions

1. Why is a certain audience shocked by the use of certain language?
2. What do taboos say about cultural values and shared beliefs?
3. How is language used to break taboos?

Language and power

One of the many uses of language is to exert power over others through the use of language. Power may be wielded for various reasons, such as creating allegiance to a political stance or decision, defining identities, or naming categories to include or exclude. What's more, the use of one style of language over another in various situations demonstrates where allegiances lie and who holds power.

Guiding questions

1. How does one exert power through language?
2. How is language used to propagate ideas and ideologies?
3. Where do we see evidence of linguistic imperialism in the Anglophone world?
4. How do titles, groupings, or terminology to identify groups help to promote or hinder a particular group's interests?
5. Is holding power always to the detriment of someone else?
6. Can language ever be used to gain power?

Language and social relations

As we look at how language is used in various contexts, we cannot avoid studying social relations and the status of different people within a society. We will need to look at factors such as different accents, different word choices, different grammatical structures, and ask ourselves how they are received in different contexts, and why they are used in different contexts.

Guiding questions
1. How is language used as an instrument to show social, racial and class differences in various texts?
2. Why are certain forms of language associated with certain social statuses?
3. When is language used to exclude? to include? Why?

The evolution of language

Where has the English language come from and where is it going? English has traveled all over the world on the back of British Imperialism and on the airwaves of MTV. Subsequently there are various Englishes, creoles and threatened languages. From Geoffrey Chaucer to Bob Marley, the English language has a rich history all around the world.

For this topic we explore different Englishes, asking ourselves: 'What are the effects of language change?' You do not have to be a linguist to appreciate these linguistic differences. These texts will, however, ask you to think about the origins of English and the social systems that encourage English to evolve.

Guiding questions
1. Is there an inherently 'correct' English?
2. Who determines the 'brand' of English we learn and speak?
3. Is there a natural tendency for English to deteriorate? Must we take active measures to 'preserve' English?
4. Will technology change the English language and its standardized forms?

Textual Bias

Perhaps you have read a text and thought: 'This has been written with a particular agenda.' Writers write with a purpose. Often times that purpose is to persuade the reader to believe a certain ideology. Learning to identify such textual bias is part of becoming media literate. This is to say, if we are to read between the lines, understand the context of a text, and analyze the use of language, then we will want to study subjective language.

Guiding questions
1. How can we learn to identify biased language?
2. How does the context of a text help us understand its biased use of language?
3. Bias has a fairly bad reputation. Does good bias also exist?
4. Is it even possible to avoid bias?

Language and Stereotypes

For this topic, we look at how various ethnic or gender stereotypes are created in the media. We study the use of language and images in combination with particular roles in film and advertisements. Lessons on this topic explore how racial and gender stereotypes are reinforced in various ads through the use of particular images. Furthermore it is important to study the role of stereotypes in the Language A: Language and Literature course for several reasons. First of all, we need to make sophisticated comments on the audiences that texts target, meaning we must be nuanced and subtle in our analyses. Secondly, several forms of assessment, such as the written task 2, ask us how different readers may interpret the same text differently. Again, this requires a certain level of understanding and political correctness.

Guiding questions
1. How are stereotypes created in the media?
2. How do the media reinforce stereotypes?
3. How are the media critical of stereotyping?

Popular Culture

"What's current creates currency," Marshal McLuhan once said. This mantra holds true for many types of texts, such as reality TV, pop music and music videos. By studying a broad range of 'popular' texts, we are, in a sense, taking the pulse of a culture. What kinds of values are prevalent in MTV videos? How do entertaining, popular films portray social groups in a certain light?

Rather than turning our nose up at popular texts and labeling them as 'non-literary' or 'drivel', it is interesting to examine them carefully, like an archeologist would examine an ancient artifact. This section examines popular texts as reflections of cultural values.

Guiding questions

1. Do popular texts, such as Hollywood movies and MTV music videos, dictate what we believe? Or do they reflect our beliefs and cultural values?
2. What makes a text 'popular'? Can 'pop' art be 'real' art?

Language and Campaigns

As we explore how various media are used to persuade different audiences, we can look to the wealth of materials provided by political parties in their efforts to win elections. In these pages we will look the language used in political speeches, negative ads and political flyers.

Besides political campaigns we will also study advertising campaigns, which have an equally important role in winning the hearts and minds of audiences. For example we will look at a campaign launched by MTV to persuade viewers to care more about the environment. Campaigns like these rely on a range of linguistic strategies and propaganda techniques to persuade their audience.

Guiding questions

1. How is language used in political campaigns to persuade audiences?
2. How is language used in advertising campaigns to persuade audiences?
3. How are different media used to influence the public?
4. What do persuasive texts say about the cultural values of the audience that they target?