

Assignment Two

It has been claimed that language plays a key role in sustaining inequality between the sexes (Coates 1993). Do you agree?

Inequality between the sexes is a very important issue in society and language plays an important role in sustaining the inequality. Language and identity are very personal topics and are well researched and debated.

“Speech is an act of identity: when we speak, one of the things we do is identify ourselves as male or female.”

(Coates, 1986: 161)

Inequality between the sexes in society can be seen in the fact that men still have the majority of highly paid jobs. Men are physically stronger but also have more power in terms of employment and politics for example. The male of the species in general still holds a higher position in society, although the situation for women has improved over the past twenty years and this is reflected in the language we have and use.

Language is sustaining the inequality and it can be seen as sexist towards women for many reasons. One of the most obvious examples can be seen in the titles we have for people. There is only one title for a man. A male is Mr, whether he is young, old, married or single but there are three titles for a female and these titles give away some personal information. Miss is unmarried and stereotypically young and Mrs is used for married females and is considered to be an older female. A further title for females, Ms, was introduced as a supposedly neutral term like Mr but this did not

replace the Miss and Mrs titles so it became a choice not to indicate marital status and quickly had a stigma attached to it. It appeared to say something about your political opinion and carried the assumptions of a being a feminist or divorced. The title Ms had many negative connotations; it was seen as being used by old spinsters, which has negative connotations in itself. These differences of titles for males and females are an example of asymmetrical language. Asymmetrical language highlights the sexism in English. Another asymmetrical factor in English is the fact that there is no neutral generic term for a human being. For example for most animals there is a neutral generic term for the species i.e. bovine is the generic term for a cow/bull but for humans the generic term is man. More recently the use of man has decreased as people have become more sensitive about it. A further inequality in the subject area of names is the titles for women once they are married. The woman takes the man's surname as her own and loses her surname. A married couple are also known as Mr and Mrs (the male's first name) and the married surname.

The inequality between the sexes can also be seen in language through the many different negative connotations that there are for woman in comparison to the few that there are for men. Examples of this are the words for an unmarried person. For a man the use of bachelor is not seen as negative but spinster or old maid for a woman is negative.

“Spinster and old maid appear to be rarely used nowadays, perhaps because their associations are so negative. Bachelor, however, usually has positive connotations.”

(Thomas, L and Wareing, S: 1999, 71)

Sexism can also be seen in the use of marked and unmarked terms in English. Most unmarked terms are for males whilst female terms are usually marked. The marked terms are seen as the exception to the norm, with different spellings to the marked term. We can also see the inequality between the sexes highlighted in language use through swear words. There are many more female related swear words in terms of both direct insults to women and swear words that are related to the female genitalia that are used against male and females. For example whore, slag, twat and bitch are all insults about or for women, which are harsher than male related, swear words such as bastard, knob and git. Swear words, connotations and titles all help create social stereotypes, which also help sustain the sexual inequality.

In the majority of research into language and gender it is considered that there are two ways in which language is seen as sexist towards women.

“In the way they are taught to use language, and in the way general language treats them.”

(Lakoff: 1975, 4)

The language differences previously mentioned and the different way men and women use language are part of the way general language treats them and the way they are taught deals with education in school and the influence of parents and society. Men and women use language differently and this can lead to miscommunication between the sexes. Speech between all-female groups is characteristically based on their emotions and relationships and concentrated on one topic for a length of time. All male group discussions will avoid conversations about themselves or their feelings, with no specific topic they concentrate on stories of superiority and competition. “Women’s language” involves the different lexical

choices that females use in speech that men would not, it also covers the topic of politeness. There are words that are restricted to “women’s language” such as *cute* that would not be used by men. It is recently more common for women to cross over and start using language previously used by men, including swearing but there is not the cross over of men starting to use more “women’s language” such as descriptive adjectives for feelings. This reflects the situation in society with women starting to take on jobs that were previously considered to be “male” but there are not so many men taking jobs considered to be “female”. The idea of a restricted word choice for “women’s language” highlights the inequality between the sexes.

“Words restricted to “women’s language” suggest that concepts to which they are applied are not relevant to the real world of (male) influence and power.”

(Lakoff: 1975, 13)

Talk between women is often belittled by the names that it is given. Words such as gossip and chatter would never be used for an all male conversation but it is used for female conversation, which implies that the talk is of little importance but dragged out. Conversation between mixed groups often shows results of male dominance, which contradicts the general opinion that women talk more than men. Men will often interrupt women, but women will offer more back channel support in conversations. It can be considered that men and women seem to have different rules for conversations, which leads to miscommunication.

Women are considered to be more polite than men and there is also a general opinion in our society that men need to be more polite in the company of women. This comes from the fact that when children are being taught politeness when they are growing up the rules are mainly enforced by female adults. As a result of this many studies have

shown that children are more polite to females. There are many other differences between boys and girls as they are acquiring language and starting to interact with people. Girls are expected to be more polite when they are children; it is accepted for boys to throw temper tantrums but girls are expected to behave better. At an early age swearing is looked down upon by adults but boys are less likely to be criticised than girls. Education is often looked at as a starting point for the differences between male and female language. Research from Stanworth in 1981 and Kelly in 1984 has shown there are behavioural differences between girls and boys in the classroom. Boys are generally more confident and will talk more in class discussions and as a result of this get more attention from the teachers, girls remain quieter as quietness is related to politeness and they believe this is the best way to behave. This quietness could leave girls in a position where they are not actively learning and this is why it is considered that girls are in a disadvantaged position at school when it comes to language and speech. Girls do better in terms of exam results and in the humanities but boys will do better when it comes to technology and science, which is important in modern society especially in terms of employment.

“Discussion of girls’ underachievement in the education system and its linguistic correlates... assumes that differences in girls’ and boys’ language are directly related to girls’ oppression.”

(Coates: 1986, 161)

The way language is taught and the way it is used are the reasons why there is inequality in our language but there are other factors in the sustaining of the inequalities in our language. One major factor is the media. We live in a society that is very much influenced and reliant on the media and so they play an important role in creating, changing and sustaining certain things in language. With the power that a

newspaper has they can heavily bias opinion of the public. By using words that have negative connotations they can influence the perception that the public will have. They have the ability to sustain inequality between the sexes by their choice of words when writing about women and men. Women are often portrayed in the media in certain stereotypes, they are either sex object, housewife, or in need of male help as in the classic damsel in distress character. They create these stereotypes by using the language that allows for certain connotations such as *mistress*, *young girl*, *motherly*. It is not just in newspapers that this inequality is sustained; in films and television up until recently women had only their stereotypical characters to play.

When looking at inequality, it is beneficial to look at the language to see if there is sexism towards males in the vocabulary. There has only been the introduction of sexist language towards men in recent times and there is only a fraction of words for men than that for women. Society is slowly changing in its treatment of women, and the language will take a long time to change for there to be complete equality in language.

There are people that do not believe that there is inequality between the sexes now and so do not think that language plays a role in separating the sexes. I think that there has been a great improvement over the past twenty years in terms of society treating men and women differently. However because language change takes a very long time there is not a complete turn around. Although things have changed in terms of education and employment, there is still the inequality in language so it is holding back further progress. For example there has been a great increase in the number of women taking up powerful and well-paid jobs, which is minimising inequality,

language plays a role in undermining this situation. There has always been debate and confusion over terms such as policewoman, the suffix of -ess as in actress, and chairwoman. The introduction of the politically correct terms such as chairperson leads to negative feeling and many politically correct terms are mocked. Words such as actor, which are supposed to be unmarked and replace the marked equivalent, actress, are not always used and are often preceded by lady or female which is highlighting the fact that there is still inequality in language.

“Linguistic imbalances are worthy of study because they bring into sharper focus real-world imbalances and inequalities.

(Lakoff: 1975, 43)

The English language has many imbalances that we have seen, such as asymmetry, use of politeness and swearing, men and women's conversational differences and the imbalance of negative connotations for women. This all highlights that there are still some imbalances in some people's attitudes and it will be a long time before certain things change such as the availability of a neutral term like Ms without a negative stigma being attached to it.

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