

The Comparison of Hero and Heroine.

Emily Duff

The idea of heroism immediately makes me think about the split in gendered words.

I am aware that the idea of Political Correctness, or simply PC, is a heavily debated topic. There is the repeated question of; are we taking it too far by banning certain words in certain places or are we helping to make the world more comfortable for all? Gendering words is not only unnecessary in that the gender of the person has nothing to do with their capabilities in that career but can also that it isolates those who do not feel a need to assign to any gender (non-binary).

A few years ago the world took on a wave of neutralising the word Actor. There was a demand that women no longer be separated by the brand Actress but rather being allowed to also encompass Actor and make it a completely equal label. It became a neutral label that does not clarify their gender or give the connotation that the work they are doing is any less, or more, than the job a man is doing in the same industry. This need for a change in language is normal and if the demand never occurred that is when I would be worried. The desire for things to stay the same is unhealthy - as we learn and grow so should the language we decide to use.

Language change often occurs naturally due to lexical gaps appearing within the English language. This means that, gradually, people will learn to adapt their language rather than having a need for others to direct this language change. Societal influences help to create this new vocabulary such as semantic change occurring with a unanimous shift in beliefs which mean words are interpreted within their new contexts. For example, "terms of endearment" being commonplace prior to the thought chain of gender inequality and sexual manipulation. This use of language is purposeful in order to convey the opinions of the time, rather than the other way around.

Seemingly sexist words and phrases, like "terms of endearment", have developed through this idea of societal shifts - although they may have further to come. For example, the word 'babe' has developed from referring only to a baby to a term of endearment to being, not legally but socially and pragmatically, banned in the workplace after the #MeToo movement. This can show how social pressure for language change is sometimes appropriate in order for certain social changes to occur, such as gender/racial/sexual equality. Standardisation, or an attempt to direct language, has also taken place through a pragmatic change in the form of movements such as political correctness. This is an attempt to direct which context words are used so as to avoid causing offence - although sometimes this can be taken too far. In 2000, Manchester attempted to control the language police used to address elderly which was badly received by police who argued this use of language was just 'common sense'. Although controlling language in the conventional workplace can reduce misinterpretations that often stop the development of,

mainly female, careers, on the other hand, the way in which you address the public is an example of who you are. Language helps us to make judgements and so using rude and outdated phrases reflects on that person.

While I appreciate that we need not create rules to enforce onto people's language use, I do believe that these changes will occur naturally as generations become more and more aware of things they may never experience. In fact, linguist Jean Aitchinson argues that language has “an inbuilt self-regulating capacity” and so “continual language change is natural and inevitable”. This means that language is socially sensitive and words can be used and interpreted in many ways depending on a number of variables so to control or ban words is both unnecessary and complicated because instead, those using the language will naturally adapt to their environment. Natural language change is constantly occurring for many reasons including the idea of words becoming ‘outdated’ and arbitrary. A more clear example of this is the word ‘telegraph’. While at the time of use telegraphs were the height of technology and so played a role in many everyday situations, they have fallen out of use and consequently so has the vocabulary that came with it. This is a path that the need for gender-specific language may follow as we learn to appreciate new ideas of gender as a spectrum and so no longer need to be so clearly labelled.

Lastly, Heroes by David Bowie came out in 1977 and yet he was able to know both himself who “will be king” and the other person who “will be queen” would both “be heroes” rather than a hero and a heroine. Even if it was just for one day.