

## Language Used as a Form of Power, Privilege, and a Force

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**Abstract:** For centuries, language has been used by the dominant culture both as a means of constructing power and as a way of maintaining it. Race, language, gender, and sexuality can all contribute to reinforcing one's identity as an *other*. In doing so the dominant culture can create and reinforce blame and the perpetuation of minority groups as the "others" using language. Using the method of structuralism, this study aims to demonstrate the social construct in which language used by dominate culture validates the power, privilege, and force of dehumanizing language in the form of *othering*.

*Keywords:* dehumanizing language, structuralism, othering, identity

Woven into the fabric of the American cultures are the basic concepts of structuralism, particularly structural linguistics, where the structure of language has been constructed and used as a form of power, privilege, and a force. Milner (1991) suggests that structuralism are methods of structured linguistics that can be universally applied successfully to all aspects of human culture (as cited in Crotty, 1998, p. 199). A French linguistic, Ferdinand de Saussure, founder of structural linguistics posits language is an institution; word is an event, making the distinction that language (*langue*) is a system shared by all speakers of a certain language and word (*parole*) is the individual speech-act in which language-as-a-system is expressed and embodied (Crotty, 1998). For the purpose of this project, the researchers employ the method of structuralism is to demonstrate the social construct in which language used by dominate culture validates the power, privilege, and force of dehumanizing language in the form of "othering."

The term "Othering" is used to describe how social group oppositions ("Us" vs "Them") are represented in language and becomes the source of meaning for the structuralist" (Crotty, 1998, p. 199). The structuralist in this project will be referred to as the dominant culture, primarily White, sis, heterosexual, male. For centuries, language has been used by the dominant culture both as a means of constructing power and as a way of maintaining it. Perceived and experienced difference perpetuated by the concept of "otherness" negates identity and establishes a motive for potential discrimination (Staszak, 2009). Race, language, gender, and sexuality can all contribute to reinforcing one's identity as an "other" (Jackson II & Hogg, 2010). In doing so the dominant culture can create and reinforce blame and the perpetuation of minority groups as the "others" using language.

### Methodology

Nine individuals ranging in age from twenty-two to sixty-seven participated in interviews and were recruited according to preselected criteria relevant to the proposed research questions. There was a specific emphasis on selecting individuals who have experienced a system of language that is either wrapped within or organized around one or more dimensions of an individual or group-based difference. Interviewers were collecting qualitative data only from

participants that other team members nominated. Further, to help eliminate bias interviewers made sure to collect data from participants they did not previously know.

### **Sampling Technique**

Purposive sampling was used to select participants for the analysis. Although there was a potential for limitations such as researcher bias, it offered a sampling process that made it possible to select individuals from a diverse range of backgrounds that were relevant to the issues being studied. The sampling design also offered researchers an opportunity to develop critical insight by which language could be examined through a structural lens. Milner (1991) explains that as an approach structuralism focuses its “search on constraining patterns or structures that claim individual phenomena have meaning only by virtue of their relation to other phenomena as elements within a systematic structure” (as cited in Crotty, 1998, p. 197). As such, the possible effect that any limitation such as researcher bias is minimal given that individuals are subject “to conform to a system of social meaning embedded in language rather than account for reality in any true sense” (Crotty, 1998, p. 199).

### **Interview Protocol**

Researchers used a semi-structured interview protocol for interviews with participants. The following questions and prompts were included:

1. As it relates to your own interactions with others and as it pertains to language, do you prefer to treat others as you would have them treat you or treat others as they would want to be treated? Explain your preference and why you think it helps in your daily interactions with others.
2. Do you think your use and understanding of language is different from someone who may identify themselves differently from you? Explain how it may differ or how it may be the same.
3. How do you identify (what identity do you use to describe who you are in the world today)?
4. What word do you dislike the most that is associated with your identity and why?
5. Did this language increase self-hate, hurtful ideas about yourself? If so, how do you view your identity?
6. What is the most effective way to educate people on how to develop a deep, critical, and inclusive understanding of others' identities? Why?
7. How does language play a role within the university setting?
8. How does language shape your ability to learn and feel included in educational settings?

9. Can you think of a time when language was used to reinforce power structures within learning environments as an adult and how did this impact future learning gatherings?
10. How can minority groups protect their identity and culture in the face of increasing social globalization?
11. This is an election year, so what advice would you give the political candidates in addressing issues of race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality in the United States?

Researchers utilized a structured interview protocol to ensure that participants' answers could be reliably collected and that comparisons could be made with confidence between participants or between different interview sessions. Participants were recorded in two formats: audio-only and visual using Zoom Video Communication technology. All nine audio recordings were transcribed and reviewed by researchers in preparation for data analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis for this project was performed using a thematic structural analysis; by extracting the themes from the participant interviews and analyzing the words and sentence structures (Medelyan, 2020). The coding is aligned with the tenets of structuralism where the components of language are interrelated to one another and get their meaning from that relationship especially as it pertains to epistemes which are systematic frameworks that define their own truths criteria which are embedded in and imply particular institutional arrangements (Crotty, 1998, p. 201). The researchers coded the interviews to identify themes. A theme can be described as a recurring aspect of the participant's accounts detailing their experiences and perspectives that are deemed relevant to the research questions (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). The researchers sought themes of dehumanizing language as it pertains to identity, race, ethnicity, gender, oppression, discrimination, marginalization, as evidence of othering concerning the power, privilege, and force of language used by the dominant culture. Thus, the basis of structural analysis involves the fundamental rule that basic data and analytic procedures of sociology must focus on social reform (Fararo & Skvoretz, 1986).

### **Interpretation**

Based on the data gathered from this project, the researchers observed how language can be used to facilitate and perpetuate the process of othering in which dominant in-groups construct one or many dominated out-groups by stigmatizing a difference (Staszak, 2009). It especially highlighted discussions among researchers and participants as to how language is used to reinforce power structures within adult learning environments and how it affects future learning gatherings. One participant said, "Most of my graduate and undergraduate experience at the same institution was learning what power and privilege looks like as facilitated through the curriculum. My own identity as a POC was being restricted and so I became more conscious where, how I inadvertently or oftentimes willingly participated in power structures in the learning environment." Another theme that resonated to both researchers and participants was the idea of identity. Participants shared how they self-identify and their perceptions of how that identity is perceived. One participant said, "although I am gender fluid . . . believe that gender

fluid is a social construct, . . . identify as a female, . . . White passing . . . queer woman, educator, those are all different parts of my identity.”

### Discussion

Data collected from interviews aligned with the selected literature of Structuralism.

“Structuralism is the methodology that implies elements of human culture must be understood by way of their relationship to a broader, overarching system or structure” (Wikipedia, n.d.).

Historically, structural linguistics, one method of structuralism, continues to perpetuate dehumanizing language as in the use of the word *nigger*, a key word in the lexicon of race relations and thus an important term in American politics (Kennedy, 2001). Social institutions and structural features can shape group-based inequality. Privilege influences power and force of language through the elevation of inequalities within our society. Language is a force illustrated through the story of Sojourner Truth as it reimagines Crotty’s (1998) posit that language influences the reality we perceive. Language informs our structures of identity utilizing actual audio clips of respondents in their own voices.

### Implications for Future Research

This project explicated the nuances in how language can be structured to either empower to disenfranchise. Language can be structured in a way that formulates a reality that promotes dominance and privilege for some groups while othering or minimizing the experiences of groups considered a minority. Given the social discourse surrounding contemporary social justice movements such as Me Too and Black Lives Matter, it was important for this study as well as future studies to examine how language is weaponized through its use and structure. This project represents a careful and thoughtful exploration of how to appraise the potency of language.

For practice, the analysis provided a glimpse as to how adult educators might engage adult learners in their own examinations of the fundamental function of language as the compulsory medium of communication, intelligibility, and rationality. This analysis seeks a better understanding of how language is shaped and language in its multiple complex connectivity. This analysis illuminates the role of language and possible steps for composing language that is more inclusive to diverse audiences. As practitioners, it is crucial to examine the forms of language and what these forms may or may not bring to those participating in social discourse.

### Conclusion

Overall, our project linked nicely to the studied epistemological perspective and themed topic; however, if there was one area for improvement, it would be adding additional time to further explore how respondents uniquely experienced or witnessed the act of othering perpetuated through language. Language is often thought of as a helpful tool that enables communication and thoughtful connection. However, when analyzed within the framework of structuralism, language serves as a powerful system capable of exposing the racism, sexism, or any other discriminant universal truth running rampant in our society. Structural linguistics demonstrating the duality of systems where language can create positive or negative impacts depending on the positioning and the power, privilege, and force associated with the implementer of the system.

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