DICTION: A MIRROR

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Language is a telltale mirror. The language we use reveals information about us: our thoughts, our preconceptions, our biases, our perceptions. Language appears to leave room for debate, yet no matter what we claim to believe in or how hard we try to hide our thoughts, the words that we use inevitably reflect our true beliefs in the short and long term. According to social psychologists James Pennebaker and Yla Tausczik, words have profound social and psychological meanings. The words that people use can shed light on their cognitive processes and thinking styles; emotions; assumptions about status, dominance, and hierarchy in interpersonal relationships; and perceptions about identities. This reflective feature of language allows us to understand the scope of social bias and prejudice. By examining a person's choice of diction, we can discover the lurking biases and discriminatory thoughts that live just below the surface in one's consciousness.

Diction reveals perception. Examining language use can be particularly helpful as we seek to understand perception because it permits us to delve deeply into covert and entrenched biases. Anthropologist Emily Martin attempts to reveal the astonishing scope of sexism in our society by examining the words employed in scientific discourses about the female reproductive system. In her essay "The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles," Martin asserts that sexism is so prevalent in our society that even scientific depictions of reproduction are tainted with stereotypes and discrimination against females. Females are rendered inferior because the female reproductive system is "wasteful" and "unproductive," whereas the male reproductive system is "remarkable" and "productive" (487). The diction adopted in many prominent biology textbooks reinforces gender discrimination in our society by stereotyping eggs—female reproductive cells—as passive gametes waiting for sperm—male reproductive cells—to start the reproductive process (491). This "passive gamete" stereotype is consistent with society's damsel-in-dis-

tress picture of females, which portrays them as weaklings, whose survival or success depends on males. Even in the scientific community, where language is supposed to be as unbiased as possible for the sake of capturing the true mechanisms of natural phenomena, language is still reflective of social discrimination and its scope.

Like Martin, author Adrienne Rich also discusses the social significance of linguistic bias. In her essay "Taking Women Students Seriously," Rich argues that by using texts that contain biased words in the classroom, educators indoctrinate students into traditional sex roles and reinforce the pervasive sexism around us. One of the most common examples of such reinforcement is the tenet of "He/Man" grammar (41). The term "He/Man" grammar, Rich notes, was coined by linguist Wendy Martyna, and it refers to the use of male pronouns and terms to refer to human beings, regardless of their gender (41). The prevalence of "He/Man" grammar, Rich argues, not only reflects the ubiquity of sexism in the literary world, but the repetition of this pronoun usage in classrooms around the world also perpetuates sexism in the world itself.

The implicit gender cues in everyday life serve as constant reminders to females that masculinity is the beacon ideal. But, despite its ubiquity in language and educational curricula, "He/Man" grammar is just the tip of the iceberg with regard to linguistic misogyny. Another example of linguistic bias is the literary assumption of the "man-self." The concept of the "man-self" refers to the assumption that the self is masculine and that anything that detracts from this masculine idea is erratic. According to Rich, the assumptions of the literary "man-self" and the use of "He/Man" grammar "burn into the brains of little girls and young women a message that the male is the norm, the standard, the central figure beside which they are the deviants, marginal, the dependent variables" (41). The idea of "man-self" insinuates to females that they are subject to, and ought to expect, discrimination because they are, fundamentally, as females, deviant from the masculine, ideal self. Biased language as such "lays the foundation for androcentric thinking, and leaves men safe in their solipsistic tunnel-vision," allowing the culture of "higher education, including the so-called sciences, [to be] male and sexist" (41). While Martin argues that linguistic bias reflects misogyny in the sciences, Rich clarifies that this linguistic bias reinforces and maintains misogy-

ny throughout educational culture, thereby contributing to the social engineering of gender roles.

The following questions arise as one studies the ideas proposed by these authors: If linguistic biases reflect and support social discrimination, shouldn't we eliminate them? And how might such a process of elimination begin?

The answer to these questions is complicated by the fact that even the best attempts to eliminate linguistic biases cannot completely eradicate their root causes. For instance, in her discussion of bias in scientific writing, Martin was not alone in arguing for a change in the way that the female reproductive system is portrayed in scientific literature. With the support of empirical evidence, some scientists were revising their interpretation of the reproductive process at the time of her writing. Instead of portraying the egg as the passive party so key to the traditional interpretation, these scientists began to reconceive of the egg cell as an active party in reproduction. However, such a change in interpretation did not eliminate the linguistic bias itself. Indeed, that bias was still in play, infiltrating the revised interpretations with new misogynistic stereotypes. For example, the egg came to be described as "an aggressive sperm catcher" (494). As Martin points out, the egg is granted "an active role" in the reproductive process "but at the cost of appearing disturbingly aggressive, [much akin to] the femme fatale who victimizes men" (498). The language used by revisionist scientists, instead of eliminating bias, added an additional dimension of bias and stereotype to what females already had to contend with. This example shows that deliberate endeavors to eliminate bias can often fail to wipe away misogynist thinking, while introducing other harmful stereotypes in the process.

Although it is impossible to be unbiased during the process of writing, people often attempt to erase signs of linguistic bias after writing. I was one of those people. I remember that the first column I attempted to submit to my school's newspaper was a political analysis of a recently-passed bill. I spent countless hours revising my writing, scrutinizing my work over and over again to make sure that I did not write anything biased or partial. I went through every word that I chose, and I even wandered around the school, asking my peers whether they would be offended if I chose one word over another. Nevertheless, my piece was rejected. This outcome gave me an incredible

shock, as I believed my work was as close to unbiased as writing could be. I was told that I had little to no stance in my writing, and the editors rejected my piece for that reason. This incident made me reconsider the value of some linguistic bias. By "correcting" my writing to successfully eliminate much of the bias in my writing, I also subtracted all of the flavor from my language, making my writing bland and uninteresting. My intention of ridding bias from my words not only was misguided, but it also came at the loss of tone and personal voice.

We cannot be unbiased when we are writing. Our words will inevitably be tainted with bias because writing is a manifestation of our perceptions. Our language reflects our upbringing, educational background, life experiences, and other vital information about us. It can be imprudent to attempt to eliminate linguistic bias after we write, because doing so can take away the sense of an individual consciousness that our words can provide. By endeavoring to censor linguistic bias, we can certainly try to manipulate the way we look in the mirror that writing provides; however, at times it is necessary to just let the mirror give us back images of our selves. If we can identify what those images appear to tell us, we might then struggle to modify what requires modification, over time, better reflecting our places as writers in the world.

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