

12. Sprache & Diversität

Episode 1: Diversity & language

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Learning Goals

1. Learning goal 1: you can define and distinguish three different meanings of the term “language and diversity”.
2. Learning goal 2: you understand the concept of discourse and why it is important to talk about it.
3. Learning goal 3: you can recognize the constitutive power of discourse and the role of inclusive language in the struggle for a more diverse society.

Introduction

- What does “diversity and language” mean?
 - linguistic diversity
 - the language (discourse) of diversity
 - the constitutive power of language, which affects/concerns/produces diversity

The discourse of diversity

- Discourse is the socially meaningful activity – most typically talk, but non-verbal actions as well – in which ideas are constructed over time. When we speak of a discourse, we refer to a particular history of talk about a particular idea or set of ideas. Thus when we talk about a discourse of gender, or varied discourses of gender, we refer to the working of a particular set of ideas about gender in some segment or segments of society” (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003: 42).
- Diversity as a discursive construct just as gender!

The discourse of diversity

- While our intentions in the use of language when interacting with or referencing groups may not be (...) ill-spirited and biased (...), when we are not conscious of the power of words and labels, our impact can be just as detrimental. For example, when we hear individuals struggle with finding the right terminology for referencing particular groups of people (i.e. African Americans, gay and lesbian, differently abled, etc), they routinely express their frustration by stating that the people from these groups... “can’t make up their minds about what they want to be called” or that they need to “figure out a name once and for all”. (...)
- <https://articles.extension.org/pages/10009/the-language-of-diversity>

Constitutive power of language

“the functioning of language is especially hard to see. This might seem an odd thing to say because we are often conscious of language when we engage in a conversation, receive a telephone call, pay our bills, answer an e-mail, and so on. What I mean is that we are not conscious of the role of language in constituting social reality. We are aware of such things as the actual conscious speech acts we perform, and we are often aware of such unimportant things as the accents with which other people speak, but the constitutive role of language in the power relations in which we are immersed is, for the most part, invisible to us”.

Searle 2010: 90

Constitutive power of language

- every time we use language to talk about something, we do more than express our opinions: with the words we choose, we create a particular version of reality, we perpetuate – or challenge – a particular system of power relations
- for example, every time we say ‘ladies and gentlemen’ we create a world where only and exactly these two options exist
- this way, language can impact diversity even when diversity is not the topic being talked about

Constitutive power of language

- language as a tool of establishing, sustaining and challenging systems of dominance and hierarchies between and among groups
- by becoming aware of the constitutive power of language in everyday communication and the mechanisms that work to normalize or disguise stereotypical, discriminatory and prejudiced thinking, we can develop an ever-present sensitivity to the existence of and respect towards a diversity of perspectives

Diversity and language

- historically, our challenge with language with regard to diversity is that it has often been used as a tool of oppression for the explicit purpose of establishing and perpetuating systems of dominance and hierarchies
- as a result, in many instances throughout our society's history, language has served to advance the status of certain groups while relegating other groups to a status of inferiority

Diversity and language

- early examples of the use of language for this purpose include:
 - the designation of Native Americans (and many other colonized communities) as “savages” and “primitive” in contrast to European settlers as “civilized”;
 - the use of the term “African slaves” as if Africans had always already been enslaved and “slavery” as a phenomenon no one is responsible for;

Diversity and language

→ diminishing the status of adult women through the active use of the term “girl” (note also the use of the term “boy” towards men of colour);

→ the use of the term “America” to specifically refer to the United States as opposed to the whole Western Hemisphere that makes up America.

Note how it is not only obvious offensive/abusive terms but much subtler patterns at work!

Language as a social practice

- patterns in language use are shared by the society. One of the most important features of discourse is that it is part of social reality, a social practice. A consequence of this understanding is that with discourse we actually do something (practice = activity)
- this was originally the idea of John Austin, the author of the influential work *How to Do Things with Words* (1971)
- people do things with what they say, speech can create social realities, not only represent them

Discriminatory discourses

- discourses “work most effectively in texts which are not explicitly addressing [the respective phenomena] but construct them as part of another communicative purpose” (Koller 2012: 20)
- modern public discourse rarely is explicitly discriminatory
- e.g. overt homophobia is not widespread; “civilized” homophobia, instead, invokes very broad definitions of tolerance, ignoring particular needs of gays and lesbians and reinforcing the status quo (Struzik 2012: 124-125).

Discriminatory discourses

- research on subtle and implicit discriminatory discourse has mainly focused on racist text and talk, e.g. in Western Europe. It has been shown that while white racism is denied in public discourse, ethnic minorities are systematically associated with “problematic cultural differences at best, and more likely with illegal immigration and residence, illegal work, crime, welfare abuse, positive discrimination, and being a burden of all social resources, such as education, housing and employment” (van Dijk 1993: 264)

Conclusions and recommendations

- it is through language that we learn to put people into boxes and attach evaluative labels to them; it is also through language that we can learn to recognize when and how this is happening and how to reduce it
- remember: language is not neutral and no use of language can be neutral
- try to be aware of your own stereotypes, think about where they come from (culture!)

Conclusions and recommendations

- don't ignore stereotypes expressed by others; don't accept the it's-just-a-joke excuse
- think about your own position in the society, and how it affects your perspective
- respect the way others feel about particular uses of language
- never ignore the historicity and relativity of individual situations
- don't generalize. Everyone's situation is different!

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