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Ethnography

Have you ever noticed how people and places influence our actions and language?

The situations we find ourselves in dictate what we feel, what we say, and how we say it. We use a different style of our own language around each of the various communities in which we are a part of. Most of the time, we do not even realize what we are saying, who we could be saying it to, or the impact that our words can have on other people.

I was down the shore quite recently, and I found myself in a situation where I was the only girl among six or seven college males. I don’t think this group of young men even realized that I was present in the room, and their conversation was quite shocking to me. They were conversing about a party that had occurred the previous night, and they mentioned how their friend Chris had left with a girl when the party was over. When they realized that they had not seen or heard from Chris since he left, one of the young men asked where he was. A different guy responded by saying, “He’s mackin’ on that *bitch* from last night.” When they all started laughing, I pretended as if I wasn’t offended by his choice of words. As they continued on with their pointless banter, I realized that I was no better than them, for I myself use the word “bitch” on a daily basis.

I assume you do, too. Most of us do, in fact. The derogatory word comes out of each of our mouths with out us even realizing it. It then occurred to me that there are multiple ways that one word can be used, depending on the circumstances and context of the conversation in which the word is being used. In the case stated above, the young man used the word “bitch” in a demeaning way. By calling that random girl a bitch, he showed that he does not respect or care about her dignity or her reputation.

However, not everyone who calls someone a bitch is necessarily trying to be demeaning. Many would argue that the word “bitch” is actually not demeaning at all. I was in the car with my male friend, Joe, when he started to tell me a story about this “bitch” he met the other day. From the look on my face, I think he could tell that I was offended by his choice of words. He quickly apologized and then explained to me that he was not maliciously calling the young woman a bitch, but using the word almost as if it were a pronoun in place of her name.

The usage of the word depends on the context of the situation at hand. When I am around my friends, we use the word “bitch” in a drastically different way than males do. Because I am a female, and the term “bitch” is usually used to refer to the female gender, girls may use it in as an endearing way to address their friends. An example of this would be how my best friend and I address each other. Over text, we will say things like, “Hey bitch! How was your day?” or “I love you, bitch.” We would never call each other bitch in a derogatory way; it is only playful and never serious.

However, girls are known to be catty, and in certain situations the word “bitch” is used to express deep emotion. When my friend was cheated on by her boyfriend, I vividly remember her using the word “bitch” over and over again to make herself feel better about the situation that occurred. She would say things like, “I hate that bitch” or “what does that *bitch* have that I don’t have?” It may seem harsh, but that was her way of expressing her emotions.

In addition, the word “bitch” does not always refer to females. I have witnessed conversations where young men have told other young men to “stop acting like a bitch.” I was at the gym last week when I over heard a conversation between two guys. They were bench-pressing a massive amount of weight, and when the other could not find the strength to lift the bar from his chest, his peer told him to “stop being a bitch, man.” As a female, I find it offensive to call a man a bitch because he does not fit the standards that are set for men to have. By calling his friend a bitch, he was expressing that women are not as capable as men with out even realizing he was doing so.

Similarly, there are other derogatory words that are used in different ways as well. I hear the word “whore” thrown around carelessly quite often. Similar to the word “bitch,” “whore” can be used in various ways depending on the situation or context of the conversation in which it is being used. Males are quick to call females “whores” when they feel as if a woman is promiscuous. By calling a female a “whore” a woman might feel degraded or as if her value is lessened. In addition, I have heard females use the term “man-whore” to describe a man who sleeps with multiple women. In both instances, the value of the victimized person is being compromised due to someone else’s judgment of them.

There is a famous stripper on social media named Cardi B. Cardi B has acquired quite a following because of her funny videos, tweets, and care-free attitude toward life. In one of her short videos, she is dressed in very little clothing and is preparing for a night out. In the video, Cardi exclaims, “I’m looking like a thottie, but a hoe never gets cold.” (“Thot” is a new term that teenagers use in replacement of whore or slut.) After the video went viral, young women around the world were repeating Cardi’s words, calling themselves whores, and being perfectly okay with it. One winter night, while freezing and walking back from my car with my suitemate Stephanie, she was proudly announcing, “a hoe never gets cold!” She is nowhere near what I would describe a “hoe,” but the context of the situation was humorous and not to be taken seriously. Although she was in fact cold, proclaiming, “a hoe never gets cold” made her feel a lot better.

In addition to “bitch” and “whore,” there are many other words that get thrown around carelessly. The word “gay” is a word that is quite controversial and sparks deep emotion inside of people whom it may offend. I hear the term “that’s so gay” almost everyday in the hallways, between friends, and sometimes with malicious intent. Usually when someone is calling a person “gay” they are trying to say that they are not cool or weird. Although the speaker may not intend for their words to be offensive, someone who is actually gay may find it rude to insult another person by calling them gay. There are other words that can be used, especially depending on the situation. Instead of saying, “that’s so gay,” one might say, “that’s so strange” or “that’s so uncool.”

In addition, there are times when I have heard actual gay people call themselves “so gay” to make light of a situation. For example, I have a friend named Jamie who is a homosexual. Jamie is very comfortable with her sexuality, and will even make fun of herself to lighten the intensity of an awkward situation. When she catches herself saying something extremely homosexual, she will quickly follow by saying, “wow, I am so gay!” She knows that not everyone is comfortable with homosexual relations, so she tries to make others laugh while making herself laugh as well.

Lastly, the word “nigga” is controversial as well. The “N word” has been used as a derogatory word for African Americans for hundreds of years. The word “nigga” is derived from the word “negro” which was a common word used to describe African American people. White people would refer to African people as “niggers” before the Civil Rights movement. However, the word is still used today in many different ways. People of all races use the word to refer to their friends. Often times I hear people say, “these are my niggas!” instead of “these are my friends.” I have many African American friends who have confessed to me that they may feel offended when someone who is not black uses the word in front of them.

The word is also used quite frequently in the media. Nearly every song on the radio “bleeps” out the word to cover the profanity. Because the word is so frequently used by celebrities and in rap music, people are easily influenced to use the word due to its constant repetition in everyday life. I was with my cousin and her friends, who happen to be African American, when a rap song came on the radio. Without a second thought, my cousin was singing along to the lyrics, exclaiming “nigga” at the top of her lungs, until she realized that her friends seemed to be offended by her use of the word.

I read an article written by a woman named Jarmila Mildorf that was titled “Words That Strike and Words That Comfort.” There is a quotation in this article that stood out to me in relation to my experiences. Mildorf wrote, “giving an insulting name to someone also means putting this person into a certain category of people who are considered to share characteristic features. The label thus also provides an identity and, more importantly, it conveys an implicit expectation that the person thus labeled fulfills the mostly conventional requirements for his or her specific ‘role.’ I feel as if this quotation relates to my essay because using derogatory words to address people puts them in a category that they may not necessarily belong in.

I don’t think most of us realize the power of language. Depending on the context of a situation, many of us might use words that can be offensive to others. We may not realize it when we are casually talking with our friends, but words like bitch, whore, gay, and nigga, are offensive and can hurt someone’s feelings if they over heard a conversation where they are being used. Different situations call for us to speak or act differently, however we should be more cautious of our language because it isn’t right to generalize or categorize a person because of their actions.