On January 8, 2016, the American Dialect Society (ADS, n.d.), an organization “dedicated to the study of the English language in North America,” overwhelmingly voted to recognize they as 2015’s “Word of the Year” and its “Most Useful” word. What led to this recognition for a simple pronoun? The ADS (2016) explained: “They was recognized by the society for its emerging use as a pronoun to refer to a known person, often as a conscious choice by a person rejecting the traditional gender binary of he and she.” The ADS honored the singular they because it provided an alternative to pronouns that assign a sex to a person. They symbolizes “how mainstream culture has come to recognize and accept transgender and gender fluid people, some of whom reject traditional pronouns” (Guo, 2016).

The ADS is not the only entity to recognize the singular they. In 2014, Facebook gave its users the option to choose their pronouns, including the singular they (Zimman, 2015). In 2015, the Washington Post changed its style rules. In a memo to its staff, the Post explained they is useful not just when referencing nonbinary people, but generally when one is in need of a non-sex-specific singular pronoun (Poynter, 2015). In March 2017, the Associated Press announced it changed its Stylebook to allow the use of singular they (Berendzen 2017), and in April 2017, the Chicago Manual of Style announced a similar change. All this points to the fact that English speakers “are in the midst of some kind of shift in the way pronouns are used and understood” (Zimman, 2015, p. 141). You are living through a moment where the fact that languages are living becomes recognizable.

The singular they is not new (Zimman, 2015). Since the 14th century, “singular they has been used ubiquitously to fill the place of the gender-neutral, sex-indefinite, third-person singular pronoun” (LaScotte, 2016, p. 63) and authors, including Jane Austen, William Shakespeare, and Geoffrey Chaucer, used a singular they (Zimmer, 2015). Nor is the use of a singular they a radical departure from how people actually talk. In an empirical study, LaScotte (2016) found that 68% of the time people use they to refer to a person when they do not know their sex.

The recognition of singular they has some big implications for how language organizes the world. With sex-specific pronouns, communicators marked people’s
sex even when it was irrelevant to the sentence. Writer and research associate at the Harvard Business School Silpa Kovvali (2015) argued that because people were limited to using he or she when referring to friends, coworkers, and students

our language . . . forces us to immediately characterize people as male or female, associates other aspects of their personalities with their sex and, in doing so, makes it an inseparable part of how we perceive ourselves and each other, far more so than any other random biological feature or accident of birth.

The singular they allows you to reference a person without designating their sex, not just because a person may not fit the sex binary, but also because a person’s sex usually is irrelevant to the point you are making.

If you are thinking one pronoun makes no difference, consider this: How would you feel if someone called you by the wrong name, not just once but repeatedly? How would you feel if you asked to be called one name and another person refused to recognize that as your name? How would you feel if a boss decided to call all their workers Cog because they could not bother to learn everyone’s names? You likely would feel disrespected. This explains Washington Post etiquette writer Steven Petrow’s (2014) advice to someone who resisted using singular they because they found it “odd and grammatically incorrect”:

Language is about respect, and we should all do our best to recognize how people wish to be identified, whether it is using their preferred name or a pronoun spelled any which way. In other words, do your best to adjust to changing times and terms, and address people the way they ask you.

If you think rules are rules, and people should follow them, consider the fact that other pronouns, such as you, can be both singular and plural. So why is there resistance to a singular, sex-neutral they? The controversy over pronouns demonstrates that language does, indeed, matter when it comes to gender/sex. There would be no controversy if language had no effect on the world and how people perceive it.

For example, when Merriam-Webster tweeted, “The astute may have noticed a difference in our feed. Our witty and fabulous social media manager is away. But don’t worry, they’ll return,” Maryland State Board of Education member Andy Smarick responded, “I won’t be baited into a pronoun agreement fight I won’t be baited. . . . ” A minor tweetstorm ensued. The dictionary defended the usage given they are “descriptivists” who “follow language, language doesn’t follow us.” Smarick declared, “Language rules are all that separate us from the animals” (as cited in Crum, 2016). Although Smarick meant for the exchange to be “lighthearted ribbing,” it generated some intense responses. Commenters argued words needed to describe all people, including those who do not fit the gender binary. Smarick’s (2016) response?

So in the spirit of humility, after getting this feedback, I researched the topic and talked to a number of colleagues about the way the “singular they” has evolved,
how it's now being used, and why more organizations are adopting it. I’ve learned a great deal, and I’m much more aware. For example, I better understand and appreciate why those for whom the “singular they” is already an integral part of an identity-sensitive lexicon interpreted my response as a provocation.

Though I didn’t mean to wade into such a sensitive issue, in some eyes, I did. It’s a very good reminder to those of us who write: Words have enormous meaning, always manifest but often latent as well. And those meanings can vary dramatically from one person or group to the next.

As someone who trades in words, that’s a reminder I’ll take with me. (paras. 17–19)

Language matters, even a simple pronoun. And changing pronouns has implications for other words. For example, if one wants to move away from a rigid sex binary, then Mx. is a useful replacement for Ms. and Mr., and Latinx can replace Latino or Latina (Scharrón-del Río & Aja, 2015).

The element of sexist language that has received the most attention is the use of sex-exclusive language (e.g., generic he or man used to refer to any person or to all people). Research conclusively demonstrated that sex-exclusive pronouns and nouns influence people’s perceptions (Martyna, 1980a, 1980b, 1983; McConnell & Fazio, 1996; McConnell & Gavanski, 1994; Miller & James, 2009; Newman, 1992; Ng, 1990; Wilson & Ng, 1988). People do not read and hear man as a noun referring to all human beings, and people do not read and hear he as a pronoun for those who are not men. Every major style manual (APA, MLA, Chicago, Turabian, New York Times) requires sex-inclusive language that does not exclude over half the population. It is clear he as a pronoun does not refer to everyone; not everyone identifies as a man. Similarly, he or she does not refer to everyone; not everyone identifies as a man or a woman.

Enter singular they. Petrow (2016) declared, “In 2016, ‘they’ became singular, and everyone learned more about gender.” We agree that this example of language change has much to teach about gender/sex. It illustrates the power of language to make some gender/sexes visible and others invisible if not impossible. It illustrates how language can be used to suppress and subordinate by marking some groups and not others, by providing language for some people and not others, and by denying vocabulary to some groups and not others. In addition, the resistance to these evolutions in language demonstrates that controversies over language are important. Finally, the singular they demonstrates how language can be used as a form of resistance and how new language can be developed or old language put to new uses.

Language is more than a tool used to transmit information or a mirror to reflect reality. Words do things. Saying something is as much an action as moving something. However, people do not always recognize that every time they communicate, they engage in symbolic action constructing social reality.

Language structures people’s understanding of social reality, and insofar as gender/sex is part of social reality, language about gender/sex structures understandings of gender/sex and hence structures gender/sex. People speak and perform their bodies and identities into being. Australian scholar Dale Spender (1985) described language as “our means of ordering, classifying and manipulating
the world. It is through language that we become members of a human community, that the world becomes comprehensible and meaningful, that we bring into existence the world in which we live” (p. 3).

This chapter focuses on patterns of communication embedded in language that speak to how sex and gender have been structured and, in turn, have structured the world. Sex is not a thing (even though the word is used to describe the human body), and gender cannot be held in your hands. Instead, when you study sex and gender, you study the trace evidence of them in language. To understand this, we first explore theories explaining the power of language. We then identify ways in which language is used to subordinate and to liberate.

The Power of Language

Rhetoric scholar Kenneth Burke (1966) argued that human beings are “symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing)” creatures (p. 16). He did not stop at this description. Instead, he asked, “Do we simply use words, or do they not also use us?” (p. 6). Linguist Robin Lakoff (1975) answered this question: "Language uses us as much as we use language” (p. 3). Burke’s question and Lakoff’s answer direct students of language to consider how words circumscribe people’s interactions with each other and the world.

Words do not exist in isolation but combine to form terministic screens, filters composed of language that direct people’s attention away from some things and toward others. Burke (1966) highlighted the “necessarily suasive nature of even the most unemotional scientific nomenclatures” (p. 45). For example, even the language used in a world geography textbook, a subject that seems relatively objective, is persuasive. In 2015, Roni Dean-Burren received a text from their teenage son, Coby, of a photo of the ninth-grade textbook used in Coby’s class (Wang, 2015). A caption on the map of the eastern United States indicated, “The Atlantic Slave Trade

![Figure 5.1](image-url)
between the 1500s and 1800s brought millions of workers from Africa to the southern United States to work on agricultural plantations” (see Figure 5.1).

One word in particular directs attention: workers. The word workers selects out for attention the idea that Africans willingly emigrated to the United States for work, and it deflects the reality of slavery. White slavers forcibly brought Africans to the United States not as workers who received pay, but as enslaved people whom Whites violently forced to toil in forced labor. The publisher quickly admitted the error, corrected the caption in digital versions, and offered schools corrected versions or stickers to cover up the caption.

This example illustrates how all communication is persuasive because “even if any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality” (Burke, 1966, p. 45). A single word can direct the way you see the world. In addition, words interact with one another to form a screen through which you view the world. Thus, because language directs people's attention to see some things about gender/sex and not others, terministic screens are sexed and gendered.

Another example clarifies Burke's point about how language directs attention. Reproductive freedom and abortion are rhetorically charged issues in the United States. Two main sides have long dominated the controversy: pro-life and pro-choice. People who are pro-life tend to refer to the “reality” as a baby, whereas those who are pro-choice tend to refer to the “reality” as a fetus. Each term selects, deflects, and reflects reality in a particular way and calls forth different clusters of terms that accompany it.

Baby accurately reflects reality insofar as some people often ask, “When is the baby due?” and some people perceive miscarriage as the loss of a baby. Baby also selects a particular aspect of reality to highlight; it focuses attention on how the reality is a fully formed human being separable from its gestational location. A person could leave a baby in a room unattended (but of course safely ensconced in a crib). However, when in the womb, it cannot be separated from its location. Baby also selects a particular type of relationship to other human beings; babies have mothers and fathers, not women and men. Baby also calls forth positive associations because U.S. culture is pronatal; it celebrates the arrival of babies. People think of babies as innocent and pure. Once people think of the “reality” as a separate and distinct human being, to terminate its existence means that someone has committed murder.

In the process of selecting some parts of reality to highlight, baby also deflects that the “reality” is located within a person's body, and it deflects the possibility that women can be something other than mothers; if there is a baby, there is a mother. It also deflects the fact that people recognize stages in development in the human as it undergoes gestation, from zygote to embryo to fetus.

In the same way that baby reflects, deflects, and selects parts of reality, so does the term fetus. Fetus selects those very parts of reality that the term baby deflects. It selects the reality that is described in medical and scientific terms, that gestational stages exist, and that a fetus cannot exist without a person to carry it. In fact, fetus reverses the relationship: Babies have mothers, whereas women carry fetuses. In selecting the medical reality, fetus highlights a not-yet-complete human being. Although people may fondly imagine cuddling a baby while sitting in a rocking
chair, imagining cuddling a fetus is not quite the same. *Fetus* highlights the incompleteness of the human.

In the process of selecting, *fetus* also deflects attention away from the very things *baby* selects. *Fetus* deflects the emotional attachments people tend to have to small human forms, and it deflects the possibility that the fetus can be murdered. Fetuses are not murdered; instead, pregnancies are terminated.

Ultimately, words contain implicit exhortations to see the world one way rather than another. Words “affect the nature of our observations” (Burke, 1966, p. 46). However, Burke (1966) went even further, positing that “many of the ‘observations’ are but implications of the particular terminology in terms of which the observations are made” (p. 46). People see only that for which they have words.

Lexicographer Julia Penelope (1990) extended this analysis from a gender/sex perspective to highlight how systems of sexism have influenced the words available:

Language draws our attention to only some experiences in some ways, making it difficult to grasp and articulate those it doesn’t provide labels or descriptions for. We can describe feelings and perceptions English doesn’t provide words for, but finding an accurate description takes time and patience and some fluency with the language. Because English foregrounds only some aspects of experience as possibilities, we have a repertoire of specific gestures, sounds, words, sentence structures, metaphors, that focus our attention on just those activities named by patriarchy. (p. 204)

Given this, it is important to understand the patterns present in language that privilege some views of the world, while displacing others. One way to track power’s presence in language is to identify when some groups’ perspective can be found in language and other groups’ cannot.

In 1963, when Betty Friedan identified women’s discontent caused by sexism as “the problem that has no name” (p. 11), she recognized that the English language does not serve all its users equally. Language is created, maintained, and changed by its users, but not all users have equal access to influencing the language. Those who belong to dominant groups within a culture have more influence over the language and, hence, over the terms that form a culture’s terministic screen.

Some oppressed and subordinated groups attempt to speak to the challenge presented by problems without names. In the United States in the 1960s, consciousness-raising groups were used by many White, middle-class women to talk about subjects considered taboo, such as their sexuality (Campbell, 1973). Writers such as Gloria Anzaldúa, a scholar of Chicana and feminist theory, used poetry, slang, multiple languages, unique forms, and profanity in academic writing (Palczewski, 1996). Sociolinguist Braj Kachru (1982) documented ways in which second-language speakers of English adapt the language to better reflect their worldviews, resulting in multiple world Englishes.

Rules of language usage mute people, too. Penelope (1990) focused on the grammatical rules that govern language use, as well as the words, and argued that the English language is not neutral but supports patriarchy insofar as English creates a patriarchal universe of discourse (PUD):
A “universe of discourse” is a cultural model of reality that people use daily to decide how to act and what to say in specific contexts. It is the same thing as “consensus reality,” and those who accept its terms assume that it is an accurate description of reality. In fact, people can be so attached to “consensus reality” that its assumptions and predictions override contradictory evidence. (pp. 36–37)

When the model of reality is one in which a patriarchal system dominates, then that model tends to hide the exercise of male privilege.

The existence of a consensus reality explains why thinking critically about gender/sex can be so difficult. The language system pushes people to see things in a particular way. For example, according to the existing consensus reality, there are only two sexes, the sexes are opposite, and the words used to describe those sexes are not semantic equivalents.

Penelope’s analysis made clear that once people accept that language has power, then they need to start thinking about how those with power deploy language to maintain and extend power: by denying access to it (e.g., refusing education or public speaking forums), by stripping others of their languages (e.g., the forced suppression of Native American languages in Bureau of Indian Affairs schools beginning in the 1880s and continuing until passage of the Native American Languages Act of 1990), by generating rules of proper usage (e.g., proper English as a class and race marker), and by structuring the language in such a way that it masks power.

Language Can Be Used to Oppress and Subordinate

Thus far, we have described how dominant groups structure reality through language. We now identify some specific examples of language-based gender/sex privilege. Some of the examples may seem natural, unremarkable, or insignificant. This is part of the power of language. Linguist Deborah Cameron (1998) noted,

Language is ideological. The same reality can be represented in any number of ways, and the power of linguistic conventions lies precisely in the selectiveness with which they represent the world, making one way of perceiving reality seem like the only natural way. (p. 161)

Our hope is that by learning to recognize the language patterns that reinforce sex and gender inequality in U.S. American English, you will develop the critical faculties to think more politically about all language use, your own included.

He/Man Language

He/man language refers to the use of masculine pronouns and nouns to refer to all people. Style manuals are in universal agreement that the universal he or man is not an acceptable neutral term to describe all people. This is consistent with informal
conversation. Most people forgo sex-exclusive language in regular conversation. In a study of the use of the generic he, researchers Jeffrey L. Stringer and Robert Hopper (1998) found that the “generic he occurs rarely, if at all, in spoken interaction” (p. 211). In an analysis of scholarly writings and the New York Times from 1970 to 2000 and a comparison of personal writing from 1990 to 2008, cognitive scientist Brian D. Earp (2012) found “he/man language is increasingly less used, and nonsexist alternatives are on the rise” (p. 15). The conclusion? “We may be well on our way to seeing the ultimate extinction of masculine generics in the English language. It would be about time” (p. 16).

Although people no longer use the generic he in conversation, and style manuals discourage it in written communication, it is common, even acceptable, for guys to be used to describe all people. Urban Dictionary takes a dig at the phrase by defining it as, “Proof of America’s sexist bias. Although it’s obviously designed to address the male sex, this phrase is used just as often by girls between girl[s]” (aleclair, 2006). Why does something as seemingly benign as the phrase you guys matter? Sherryl Kleinman (2002) explained that “male-based generics are another indicator—and, more importantly, a reinforcer—of a system in which ‘man’ in the abstract and men in the flesh are privileged over women” (p. 300; emphasis in original). Kleinman referred to male-based generics as “symbolic annihilation,” which simultaneously makes women less visible and objectifies them: “If we [women] aren’t even deserving of our place in humanity in language, why should we expect to be treated as decent human beings otherwise?” (p. 302). So is the debate over sex-inclusive language resolved? It is our position that sex-exclusive language should not be used. Sex-inclusive language should be used.

**Semantic Derogation**

Semantic derogation occurs when two terms ought to represent parallel concepts, but one term is derogatory while the other is not (Schulz, 1975). Penelope (1990) described these terms as “semantically symmetrical (paired), but conceptually asymmetrical” (p. 48). Some scholars argue that derogation is sex based: “Because naming and defining is a prerogative of power, semantic shifts in vocabulary have been determined largely by the experience of men, not women” (Miller & Swift, 1993, p. ix).

Consider the degree college students earn: the bachelor’s degree. The parallel term for bachelor is spinster, yet spinsters are thought of as dried-up old women who never married. The etymology of spinster indicates that positive meanings were once attached to it but have atrophied over time. Originally, spinster referred to women who spun fibers into thread and yarn. When men began to spin, the term referred to men, too. In the 17th century, the term began to refer to unmarried women (although some resisted this usage because spinster also was a colloquial term for harlot); the term became sexualized and derogated. Whereas bachelor referred to any unmarried man, a spinster was an unmarried woman beyond the marriageable age, making clear that men are never too old to marry but women can be. Other examples include mistress/master; lady/lord; womanly/manly; tramp (sexually active woman)/tramp (homeless man); to mother children/to father children; governess/governor; and madam/sir.
An interesting pattern emerges in the derogation of nouns: Sexuality is used to derogate women. Bachelor and spinster ought to be equal, but spinster connotes someone who cannot get any sex. Lord and lady ought to be equal, but lord designates a ruler, whereas lady contains a prescription for how women should act. Master and mistress ought to be equal, but a mistress is a kept woman who gets sex by “stealing” it from another woman. Governor and governess ought to be equal, but again the masculine term connotes political power, whereas a governess is a person who takes care of others’ children.

**Semantic Imbalance**

Semantic imbalance refers to an overabundance of terms to describe something related to one group but few terms existing to describe the other. Answer this:

How many terms can you think of that describe a sexually active woman? A sexually active man?

The number of terms available that negatively describe women swamps the list of terms that describe men. Only recently have terms like player, referring to men, come to carry negative connotations typically associated with slut, referring to women, but even now player is not nearly as bad a name as slut.

Semantic imbalance is created not only when there are too many words but also when there are too few. Women often are referred to as hysterical (hysteria, derived from the Greek word for women’s reproductive organs), yet men are not referred to as testical. Similarly, men may be referred to as womanizers, but women are not manizers (Penelope, 1990, p. 187).

Peggy Orenstein (2017) interviewed 70 young women, age 15 to 20, to understand how they understood their sexuality and physical intimacy. The main finding: Girls lack a language to talk about their body parts. Orenstein noted how parents, when naming body parts (nose, toes, belly button, etc.), typically will name boys’ genitals, but not girls’ (p. 61). Why might this be of concern? Orenstein explained: “Leaving something unnamed makes it quite literally unspeakable: a void, an absence, a taboo” (p. 61). That void continued as the girls got older, impacting how the young women understood sexuality.

**Semantic Polarization**

Semantic polarization occurs when two parallel concepts are treated as though they were opposed, like “opposite sexes.” In case you had not noticed, we avoid that phrase because it structures a perception of the world that we find problematic. The sexes are not opposite; all are human and may have more in common with those who are a different sex than with some who are the same sex. However, by framing the sexes as opposite, language reentrenches the notion that there are two and only two sexes and that the characteristics of one cannot be possessed by the other. Communication scholar Barbara Bate (1988) explained, “If you see women and
men as polar opposites, you are likely to believe that any features or quality of men should be absent from women, and vice versa” (p. 16).

Marked and Unmarked Terms

Marked and unmarked terms occur when someone combines an indicator of a person’s sex (or race, or other identity ingredient) with a noun in some cases, but not all. When one sex or race tends to dominate a category, people may sex or race mark the category only when a nondominant person fills it. Because the nursing profession is dominated by women, people tend to refer to “the nurse” (unmarked) when the nurse is a woman but refer to “the male nurse” (marked) when the nurse is a man. Similarly, you often see references to “female police officer” but not “male police officer,” “male slut” but not “female slut,” and “Black professor” but not “White professor.” In all these examples, the race and sex of the person are incidental or irrelevant to the job being performed. Marking creates the impression that a person is violating a norm. This construction is not as common as it once was, but it still is an interesting tendency to track. It reveals a great deal about cultural expectations and designated roles, which may explain why it is most persistent in university sports teams: The men's team is the "Bears," and the women's team is the “Lady Bears.”

Trivialization

Trivialization refers to the use of diminutives to refer to a disempowered group member. Historically, Black men’s masculinity was demeaned by the use of the term boy. Although boy does not initially seem like a derogatory term, when used by a White person (often younger) to refer to a Black man (often older), it exposes the power dynamic at play. No matter how old, wise, or respected, a Black man was forever diminished as an immature person—a boy. Women also often are referred to in ways that strip them of stature. Women are referred to as desserts: honeybun, cupcake, sweetheart, tart. Linguist Caitlin Hines (1999) argued that this is no accident, insofar as dessert metaphors refer to women not just as “objects, but sweet (that is compliant, smiling), and not just desserts, but pieces or slices” (p. 148).

To correct semantic imbalance and derogation, trivialization, and marked terms, it is not enough simply to erase them from our vocabularies. Cameron (1998) pointed out,

> The crucial aspect of language is meaning: the point of non-sexist language is not to change the forms of words just for the sake of changing, but to change the repertoire of meanings a language conveys. It’s about redefining rather than merely renaming the world. (p. 161)

Therefore, attention to the vocabulary people have—or lack—becomes important.

Naming

Naming refers to the practices surrounding how proper nouns (names) are assigned to people. A power imbalance exists between the sexes in relation to
naming practices after heterosexual marriage. Historically in the United States, women lost their names after marriage, becoming “Mrs. John Smith.” Women’s marriage status was embedded in their names; married women were addressed differently than unmarried: Mrs. versus Miss. As early as the 1600s, the alternative of Ms. was proposed as a way to make designations parallel: Men were Mr. whether married or unmarried and so women, too, could be Ms. whether married or unmarried. In addition, the option of keeping one’s name after marriage was introduced. In the 1970s, only 1% of women kept their name, in the 1980s it was 9%, and in the 1990s a high of 23% kept their name. Then, in the 2000s, the percentage leveled off at 18% (Kopelman, Shea-Van Fossen, Paraskevas, Lawter, & Prottas, 2009). Even when women keep their birth names or hyphenate it with their spouse’s last name, an overwhelming majority still give their children their husband’s last name (Emens, 2007).

Scholars who study naming practices see it as a “window into gender attitudes” (Hamilton, Geist, & Powell, 2011, p. 145). Of respondents in one study, 72.3% agreed that “it is generally better if a woman changes her last name to her husband’s name when she marries” (p. 156) and 49.9% thought states should “legally require a woman to change her name” (p. 157). Despite this, some women keep their names after marriage. As an intersectional approach might predict, other factors than sex influence one’s naming practice. Kopelman et al. (2009) found that women with high-level jobs like CEO, professional occupations like doctor, and those in the arts or entertainment fields tended to keep their name more often.

Mr. and Ms. are not the only honorifics related to naming. Another honorific has emerged: Mx.—a sex-neutral alternative to Mr. and Ms. The Oxford English Dictionary added the term to its lexicon in May 2015 to account for changes in social understandings of sex and gender. In explaining the change, OED assistant editor Jonathan Dent explained, “This an example of how the English language adapts to people's needs, with people using language in ways that suit them rather than letting language dictate identity to them” (as cited in Segal, 2015). The interesting challenge, however, is when to use the term. If the goal is to not needlessly reference sex and reinforce the sex binary, if you only use Mx. when referencing gender/sex non-conforming people, then that goal is not achieved. It is for that reason that many advocate the use of gender/sex-inclusive terms like they and Mx. for everyone (Kowvali, 2015; Rosman, 2015).

**Lack of Vocabulary**

Lack of vocabulary refers to the dearth of words to describe some elements of reality. Friedan’s writing about problems without names highlights feminism’s struggle to talk about sexism, sexual harassment, date rape, and marital rape, all terms feminists created to recognize these offenses. It is impossible to develop solutions to a problem when it has no name and, hence, is neither identifiable nor observable.

Spender (1985) argued, “Historically, women have been excluded from the production of cultural forms, and language is, after all, a cultural form—and a most important one” (p. 52). Its import stems from language’s ability to “form the limits of our reality” (p. 3). Because of women’s exclusion from the “production of the legitimated language,
they have been unable to give weight to their own symbolic meanings, they have been unable to pass on a tradition of women's meanings to the world” (p. 52). The fact that women have not had the same opportunity does not mean they have had no opportunity. One example of language development occurred during the debates over pornography that dominated women's movements in the 1980s.

Although men (as religious figures and political leaders) historically controlled the definition of pornography, they no longer monopolize its meaning. Historically, pornography possessed two meanings: speech and (in the 1500s) images used as an insult to the church and state (Hunt, 1993). These interpretations dominated pornography's meaning until feminism began to challenge the way women's sexuality was defined. Andrea Dworkin and Catharine A. MacKinnon (1988; among many others) focused on pornography's effect on women and redefined pornography as an act of sex discrimination, in the process rejecting a focus on pornography's effect on society's moral fiber (Palczewski, 2001). Although the municipal ordinance they wrote did not survive judicial scrutiny, they influenced Canadian law regarding sexually explicit, violent, and sexist materials.

Developing a vocabulary when one is lacking enables you not only to name your experience but also to critically reflect on it—an important component of coming to political agency. African American feminist theorist bell hooks (1989) explained how “simply describing one's experience of exploitation or oppression is not to become politicized. It is not sufficient to know the personal but to know—to speak it in a different way. Knowing the personal might mean naming spaces of ignorance, gaps in knowledge, ones that render us unable to link the personal with the political” (p. 107). For hooks,

Politization necessarily combines this process (the naming of one's experience) with critical understanding of the concrete material reality that lays the groundwork for that personal experience. The work of understanding that groundwork and what must be done to transform it is quite different from the effort to raise one's consciousness about personal experience even as they are linked. (p. 108)

In other words, the development of a vocabulary with which to accurately describe one's experiences is an important process during which one needs to reflect on the political implications of that experience.

The Truncated Passive

Grammatical patterns provide evidence of sexism in language because they enable speakers to deny agency and perpetuate oppression (Penelope, 1990). The prime culprit is the truncated passive, in which the use of a passive verb allows the agent of action to be deleted (or truncated) from the sentence. Anti-violence educator Jackson Katz used this example to illustrate Penelope's point:

John beat Mary. [active voice]

Mary was beaten by John. [passive voice]
Mary was beaten. [truncated passive]

Mary was battered. [truncated passive]

Mary is a battered woman. (as cited in Keren, 2012)

Each sentence is grammatically correct but operates very differently in its depiction of the event. Sentence constructions using the truncated passive enable blaming the victim because the victim is the only one present in the sentence. Katz explained, “The political effect has been to shift the focus from John to Mary” (as cited in Keren, 2012). The final sentence completely removes the agent from attention.

Individuals who attempt to avoid explicit responsibility for the consequences of the power they exercise often use truncated passives. The result of “agent-deletion leaves us with only the objects of the acts described by the verbs. Passives without agents foreground the objects (victims) in our minds so that we tend to forget that some human agent is responsible for performing the action” (Penelope, 1990, p. 146), as in the phrases “mistakes were made,” “Hanoi was bombed,” or “the toy got broken.” Penelope (1990) explained, “Agentless passives conceal and deceive when it doesn’t suit speakers’ or writers’ purposes to make agency explicit” (p. 149). As a result, “this makes it easy to suppress responsibility and enables “protection of the guilty and denial of responsibility, . . . the pretense of objectivity, . . . and trivialization” (p. 149).

The Falsely Universal We

Political scientist Jane Mansbridge (1998) identified the falsely universal we: Rhetors use the collective we in political discourse to make it seem as though they are speaking about everyone when really they are representing a particular few and making invisible a distinct other. Mansbridge explained, “We can easily represent a false universality, as ‘mankind’ used to” (p. 152). Thus, “the very capacity to identify with others can easily be manipulated to the disadvantage of” a subordinated group because “the transformation of ‘I’ into ‘we’ brought about through political deliberation can easily mask subtle forms of control” (p. 143).

One often hears politicians talk about how we need to do something or that we as a nation believe in particular values, when in reality they are referencing a particular segment of the population who they hope will vote for them. It is extremely easy to fall into using we, especially when you want to create a sense of identification and community. However, as Burke (1969) pointed out, any time identification is used, one must “confront the implications of division. . . . Identification is compensatory to division” (p. 22). When a group says, “We are alike,” it also necessarily implies that others are not like them.

The Deverbing of Woman

Semantic imbalance and derogation also occur in verbs. The distinctions between the meanings of the verbs to man and to woman, which ought to be parallel, are intriguing (Palczewski, 1998). The Compact Edition of the Oxford English
Dictionary (1971) listed the primary definition of the verb *man* as “to furnish (a fort, ship, etc.) with a force or company of men to serve or defend it” (p. 1711). Its definitions of the verb *woman* included “to become woman-like; with it to behave as a woman, to be womanly. . . . To make like a woman in weakness or subservience. . . . To make ‘a woman’ of, deprive of virginity. . . . To furnish or provide with women; to equip with a staff of women” (p. 3808). *Man* carries implications of acting, typically in battle and on ships. *Woman* carries implications of being acted upon, typically to become womanlike, to be made a woman, or to be deprived of virginity. The **deverbing of woman** occurs because today, in contrast to the verb *man*, the word *woman* is seldom thought of as a verb at all.

The pattern described between *woman* and *man* also is present in other verb forms, such as *lord* and *lady* and *master* and *mistress*. *Lord’s* primary definition is “to exercise lordship, have dominion” (p. 1664). In contrast, the definition of the verb *lady* is “to make a lady of; to raise to the rank of lady . . . to play the lady or mistress” (p. 1559). Female verbs deny agency. Male verbs highlight it. *Master’s* primary verb form means “to get the better of, in any contest or struggle; to overcome defeat . . . to reduce to subjection, compel to obey; to break, tame (an animal)” (p. 1739). *Mistress* means “to provide with a mistress . . . to make a mistress or paramour of . . . to play the mistress, to have the upper hand . . . to dominate as a mistress” (p. 1820). Again, mastery involves agency, getting the better of, subjecting, compelling others to obey. *Mistress*, in contrast, is passive. A woman is provided for as a mistress; she does not mistress. Or she is made a paramour. Or she merely plays at being mistress. Or, if one focuses on the latter definitions in which agency is expressed, one realizes that it is often a false agency, for when a woman dominates as a mistress, she dominates (typically) “servants or attendants . . . household or family” (p. 1820). Agency is rarely involved; rarely is control possible and never over masters.

**Language as Violence**

The previous sections focused on how specific parts of language (pronouns, nouns, and verbs) construct sex privilege. However, particular forms of language are not the only way in which subordination is manifested. People use language itself as a form of violence. Critical race theorists examine the function of hate speech, recognizing the “relationships between naming and reality, knowledge and power” (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993, p. 5). They argue that people should recognize **language as violence**, forms of speech like hate speech (racist, homophobic, sexist, anti-Semitic language) that cause harm. Although the First Amendment has protected such speech, legal scholar Mari Matsuda (1993) argued that “an absolutist first amendment response to hate speech has the effect of perpetuating racism: Tolerance of hate speech is not tolerance borne by the community at large. Rather it is a psychic tax imposed on those least able to pay” (p. 18).

The distinction between words and actions may not be as clear as once thought. Matsuda (1993) explained, “The deadly violence that accompanies the persistent verbal degradation of those subordinated because of gender or sexuality explodes
the notion that there are clear lines between words and deeds” (p. 23). Although First Amendment absolutists argue that the appropriate response to “bad” speech is more speech, such an alternative is not always viable for those targeted by hate speech. Critical race theorist and legal scholar Charles R. Lawrence III (1993) demonstrated how words are more than what they denote:

Like the word “nigger” and unlike the word “liar,” it is not sufficient to deny the truth of the word’s application, to say “I am not a faggot.” One must deny the truth of the word’s meaning, a meaning shouted from the rooftops by the rest of the world a million times a day. The complex response “Yes, I am a member of the group you despise and the degraded meaning of the word you use is one that I reject” is not effective in a subway encounter. (p. 70)

Of course, just because one recognizes that language acts does not mean that one automatically accepts the need for legal redress. Debate over hate speech dominated the 1990s. Those working against sexism, racism, religious intolerance, and homophobia disagree on the appropriateness of legal prohibitions against words that wound, noting the danger of collapsing a word into an action (Butler, 1997). However, all agree that we must respond to, answer, deny, reject, and condemn the use of language as a mechanism of violence.

Language as Resistance

If language has the power to create inequality and injustice, it also has the power to resist them. We do not dismiss the importance of economics, politics, and law to social change, but recognize language is a precursor to recognizing the need for and the possibility of change. Penelope (1990) argued, “Changing our descriptions won’t immediately change reality or eliminate white supremacy or male dominance, but it will change the way we perceive power imbalances and the conceptual structures that make them appear to make sense to us” (p. 214). Through language, people can rename, reenvision, and reimagine the world because “language is power, in ways more literal than most people think. When we speak, we exercise the power of language to transform reality” (p. 213).

Talking Back

In Talking Back, bell hooks (1989) outlined how simply speaking can function as an act of resistance. For those who have been named subordinate, speaking rejects that naming:

True speaking is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless. . . . Moving from silence into speech is . . . a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. (p. 8)
Talking back is not talking for talk's sake but “is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice” (p. 9). Language includes the words themselves, and who is authorized to use them, on which subjects, from which social locations, and with what critical perspectives.

For hooks (1989), talking back is not simply the screaming of frustration, nor do all people speak as subjects and with a liberated voice every time they speak. hooks clarified that “to speak as an act of resistance is quite different than ordinary talk, or the personal confession that has no relation to coming into political awareness, to developing critical consciousness” (p. 14). The distinction between ordinary talk and talking back is necessary for three reasons. First, it avoids trivializing or romanticizing the process of finding a voice; coming to voice is difficult political work. Second, it avoids privileging “acts of speaking over the content of the speech” (p. 14); when talking back, what is said matters. Third, it prevents the commodification of oppositional voices; when one recognizes the oppositional element of talking back, one can no longer treat it as mere spectacle. Talking back is not mere talk but talk with a political consciousness.

**Developing a New Language**

If existing language does not provide names for a person's experiences, then one of the most profound acts of resistance is to develop new language. Developing a new language refers to the creation of vocabulary, phrases, and idioms to describe social reality. Philosopher Mary Daly (1987) explained, “New Words themselves are Mediums, carriers of messages” (p. 10). New words enable people to see new social realities.

Philosopher Sandra Harding (1995) outlined the power of naming for a marginalized group—in this case, women:

For women to name and describe their experiences in “their own terms” is a crucial scientific and epistemological act. Members of marginalized groups must struggle to name their own experiences for themselves in order to claim the subjectivity, the possibility of historical agency, that is given to members of dominant groups at birth. (p. 128)

To become agents, or people who act rather than people who are acted upon, a language on and of one's own terms is essential: “For marginalized people, naming their experience publicly is a cry for survival” (p. 129).

Examples of developing language abound. Feminist lexicographers have made efforts to create alternative dictionaries to reclaim the English language, using concepts and definitions that reveal and reflect the diverse experiences and oppressions of women, persons of color, working-class people, LGBTQ people, and people with disabilities (e.g., Daly, 1987; Kramarae & Treichler, 1992; Mills, 1993). Going beyond the creation of new words, Suzette Haden Elgin (1984/2000, 1987/2002b, 1993/2002a) developed an entire language, Láadan, for her fictional Native Tongue trilogy (“Suzette Haden Elgin,” 2004).

Women in other nations and in other times also have developed languages to come to voice. Communication scholar Lin-Lee Lee (2004) studied how, more
than 1,000 years ago in China, women developed Nüshu, a female discourse used in “texts sung and chanted by rural woman over their needlework on pieces of red fabric, handkerchiefs, and fans” (p. 407). Chinese women were excluded from formal education in Hanzi, the official Chinese script that “was created by men for the use of men.” Nüshu offered an alternative as “an oral phonetic transcription passed from generation to generation by women” (pp. 408–409). It developed in an area governed by patriarchal Confucian systems, in which men dominated women and subservience to superiors was morally required. Nüshu texts describe the details of a woman’s life and express feelings about “sexual inequality, low social status, and bad treatment” (p. 411). No one trained in ordinary Chinese can read Nüshu. Men who heard it could “understand it when performed, but they could not perform it, read it, or speak it themselves” (p. 409). This distinctive language “allowed women to have a voice, to create an individual and collective subjectivity that enabled them to confer value on and give importance to their lives” as it “transformed the hardships of women into tales that validated their lives and experiences” (p. 410).

Resignification

A word has both a denotation (the thing to which it refers) and connotation (the emotional resonances embedded within a term’s meaning). When thinking about a word’s meaning, you need to consider not only the thing denoted, but also the cultural baggage attached to and emotional responses embedded within the term. Thus, when you seek to change a sign’s meaning, or resignify it, you need to think about the connotational and denotational meanings. Resignification refers to the linguistic practice in which you reject a term’s existing meaning’s normative power, expose how the term’s meaning was constructed, and attempt to change its connotation. Instead of unreflexively using language, you would “seek to recite language oppositioally so that hegemonic terms take on alternative, counter-hegemonic meanings” (Lloyd, 2007, p. 129).

SlutWalks are an example of resignification because they embrace the term slut and seek to change its meaning (Kapur, 2012). How and why do SlutWalks work to resignify the word slut? In January 2011, a police officer at a York University panel on campus safety said women, to avoid sexual assault, should not “dress like sluts” (implying that women who do are “asking”—or deserve—to be raped). Historically, the word slut referred to a slovenly girl; in contemporary usage, it refers to a sexually promiscuous woman and has risen to the status of being a “four-letter word” (Nunberg, 2012). People could have responded to the police officer by saying “I am not a slut” or “we don’t dress like sluts” (implying that women who do are “asking”—or deserve—to be raped). Historically, the word slut referred to a slovenly girl; in contemporary usage, it refers to a sexually promiscuous woman and has risen to the status of being a “four-letter word” (Nunberg, 2012). People could have responded to the police officer by saying “I am not a slut” or “we don’t dress like sluts,” but such a response would have “affirm[ed] the stigmatic division of women operative in rape logic” (Hill, 2016, p. 32). Instead, local activists responded by embracing the term and planning what they called a SlutWalk. Instead of accepting the division of women into good and bad, slut and pure, the planners refused victim-blaming and slut-shaming (Hill, 2016). As a result, “the young women who sparked this movement have performed a semantic sleight of hand in appropriating the word ‘slut,’ making it impossible to tell the ‘good girls’ from the ‘bad girls’” (Carr, 2013).
Starting with a Facebook page and Twitter account, Toronto residents Heather Jarvis and Sonya Barnett organized the April 3, 2011, event that drew between 1,000 to 3,000 people. By the end of 2011, tens of thousands of people had marched in 200 cities and 40 countries. The July 2014 SlutWalk in Reykjavík, Iceland, drew over 11,000 people (Mendes, 2015, pp. 2–3). Organizers of SlutWalk Seattle made clear the importance of the term: “One of the most effective ways to fight hate is to disarm the derogatory terms employed by the haters, embracing them and giving them positive connotations” (as cited in Thompson, 2011, p. 14). On their website, SlutWalk NYC (n.d.) explained: “Some SlutWalk supporters have co-opted the term as a means of reclaiming the insult and defusing it of its sting by wearing it as a badge of pride to indicate sexual self-awareness and humanity.” Annie Hill’s (2016) analysis concluded, “SlutWalk subverts the meaning of ‘slut’ by resignifying the term and proliferating parodic performances of its stigmatized referent” (p. 31).

However, not all agree that slut, as a term, is something to be embraced (Dow & Wood, 2014). Professors Gail Dines and Wendy J. Murphy (2011) described the attempt to change slut’s meaning as a “waste of precious feminist resources” given how the term is “so saturated with the ideology that female sexual energy deserves punishment” (p. 25). A group of Black women also challenged the SlutWalk movement to rename and rebrand itself. Calling for an intersectional approach, they argued, “As Black women, we do not have the privilege or the space to call ourselves “slut” without validating the already historically entrenched ideology and recurring messages about what and who the Black woman is. We don’t have the privilege to play on destructive representations burned in our collective minds, on our bodies and souls for generations.” (“An Open Letter,” 2011, para. 1)

The debates about SlutWalks provide insight into the problems that face resignification. As HuffPost writer Zeba Blay (2015) clarified, “Reclaiming the word ‘slut’ is an entirely different beast for Black women.”

However, Blay argued that Amber Rose’s October 2015 SlutWalk in Los Angeles marked a turning point in the debate because that event was organized by a woman of color for women of color and, thus, was crucially inclusive of women from all backgrounds. . . . Rose’s SlutWalk and the women and men of varied gender expressions who attended were a beautiful reminder of the nuances and complexities inherent in the ongoing issue of slut-shaming and victim blaming. There are women of color in need of that kind of solidarity and understanding. There is room for women of color in the SlutWalk movement—and it has to be on our terms.

Resignification is not easy, nor always the best strategy. Even if a subordinated group resignifies a term for counter-hegemonic use, that does not mean those who are part of the dominant group can use the term with impunity.

Scholars and activists have written about the need to resignify words. Inga Muscio’s (2002) Cunt, as well as Eve Ensler’s (2000) The Vagina Monologues, reclaim cunt. Politicized sex workers resignified whore in Gail Pheterson’s (1989) A Vindication
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of the Rights of Whores. In 1968, Jo Freeman offered the “Bitch Manifesto,” Elizabeth Wurtzel’s (1998) Bitch praises difficult women, Bitch magazine offers a feminist response to pop culture, and Meredith Brooks’s song “Bitch” proclaims “I’m a bitch / I’m a lover / I’m a child / I’m a mother / I’m a sinner / I’m a saint / I do not feel ashamed. . . . So take me as I am / This may mean / You’ll have to be a stronger man.” Yet, in 2015, YouTube vlogger Laci Green questioned whether bitch could be reclaimed given it never had a positive meaning.

Many of these examples were cited in a case that went all the way to the Supreme Court in 2017. The Asian-American band The Slants fought to have its name recognized by the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (PTO). In the legal brief, they argued they were following in the long tradition of “reappropriation,” in which members of minority groups have reclaimed terms that were once directed at them as insults and turned them outward as badges of pride. In recent times, the most conspicuous examples have been words such as “queer,” “dyke,” and so on—formerly derogatory terms that have been so successfully adopted by members of the gay and lesbian community that they have now lost most, if not all, of their pejorative connotations. . . . [Band leader Simon] Tam aimed to do the same for Asian-Americans. “We want to take on these stereotypes that people have about us, like the slanted eyes, and own them,” he explained. (Brief for Simon Shiao Tam, 2016, p. 2)

Dykes on Bikes Women’s Motorcycle Contingent of San Francisco, a group that faced its own problems with the PTO, wrote an amicus curiae brief in support of The Slants, explaining how the group “purposefully and intentionally adopted the term ‘dykes’ as part of its trademark in order to highlight and confront the controversial history of that term and dispel the notion that it is disparaging” (Brief for San Francisco, 2016, p. 2).

But all this raises the question of who gets to use the resignified term. The group to whom it is applied or anyone? One might argue that only those to whom the label is applied can use it in a way that resignifies. This is the difference between the Asian music group using the name The Slants and the Washington football team using a derogatory term for Native Americans. Why is this different? When a group has used a term to injure another, then a repetition of that term by the dominant group can repeat that injury. However, this does not necessarily mean that some terms should be legally banned. Instead, it means people need to think carefully about what it means for them to use a term. Are you the group to whom the term is applied? Or are you part of the group that has repeated that term as a way to injure another? Judith Butler (1997) explained, “The resignification of speech requires opening new contexts, speaking in ways that have never been legitimated, and hence producing legitimation in new and future forms” (p. 41). This means bodies that have been used by language need to be the ones to use it in new ways.

As an illustration, many of those who participated in the 2017 Woman’s March made signs in response to President Donald Trump’s 2005 hot-mic comment about how “when you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. . . . Grab them by
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the pussy. You can do anything” (as cited in Fahrenthold, 2016). Trump used *pussy* in a way that injures, reducing women to a body part that he could grab without their consent. During the Women’s March on Washington, and around the country and globe, many wore pink “pussy hats” (knit and stitched to look like cat ears) and held up signs declaring, “This pussy grabs back.” Ashley Judd recited 19-year-old Nina Donovan’s poem “Nasty Woman” that declared, “And our pussies ain’t for grabbing. . . . Our pussies are for our pleasure. They are for birthing new generations of filthy, vulgar, nasty, proud, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Sikh, you name it, for new generations of nasty women” (as cited in Rosen, 2017). In response to the signs, TV host and lawyer Michael Smerconish asked documentarian Michael Moore (2017), “Has the word been normalized?” Moore commented, “Women have normalized it and owned it,” to which Smerconish said, “But not us,” to which Moore emphatically replied, “No! No! I think that’s not a good idea. I think women have had enough of us and our language that it’s time to show some respect but let them own the word. The word has power now that they’re going to use with it.”

Resignification is a difficult and complicated process. Even when words are reclaimed, they might (intentionally or unintentionally) create other exclusions. At the 2017 Women’s March on Washington, the reclaiming of *pussy*, for example, was perceived by some as reasserting the assumption that having a vagina is essential to womanhood. As a result, many trans-women felt excluded from the event. However, others saw *pussy* not as referring to a specific body part, but as a metaphor used to describe all feminine people. For them, the term was inclusive.

Interestingly, when a derogatory word’s history is researched, it often (but not always) turns out that the word originally had a positive meaning and only recently came to carry negative connotations. Muscio’s (2002) research on *cunt* uncovered how its precursors originally were related to titles of respect for women or names of goddesses and that the words “bitch” and “whore” have also shared a similar fate [to *cunt*] in our language. This seemed rather fishy to me. Three words which convey negative meanings about women, specifically, all happen to have once had totally positive associations about women. (p. 6)

Urvashi Vaid (1995), in an analysis of LGBTQ rights, found that *queer* originally was used as a form of self-naming by homosexuals. By the 1910s and 1920s, men who thought of themselves as different because of their homosexual attraction to other men rather than because of their feminine gender appearance called themselves *queer* (p. 42). *Queer* later developed the negative connotation still heard as an epithet in playgrounds and streets. This meaning did not develop overnight, but, as Butler (1993a) explained, “‘Queer’ derives its force precisely through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to accusation, pathologization, insult” (p. 172).

This hints at the difficulty involved in resignifying a term. People cannot simply wish a term’s connotation to change. Butler’s theory on the performativity of gender explains why this is the case: People tend to be “ventriloquists, iterating the gendered acts that have come before them” (Hall, 2000, p. 186). How does one get out
of this repetitive loop? By resignification—the repeated invocation of a term that links it to praise, normalization, and celebration. Unfortunately, even when a term may be resignified within a group of people, that does not mean the new meaning carries beyond that group. Butler (1993a) noted, “As much as it is necessary to . . . lay claim to the power to name oneself and determine the conditions under which the name is used, it is also impossible to sustain that kind of mastery over the trajectory of those categories within discourse” (p. 173). However, that may be one's only option.

Butler (1997) noted that people sometimes "cling to the terms that pain" them because they provide "some form of social and discursive existence" (p. 26). Guided by Althusser's theory of interpellation (whereby one becomes a subject because one is recognized by another), Butler posited, “The act of recognition becomes an act of constitution: the address animates the subject into existence” (p. 25). Thus, it is understandable that one might prefer being known as a queer or a bitch to not being known at all. Additionally, even as dominant naming may disempower, it also creates locations for resistance, for “opening up of the foreclosed and the saying of the unspeakable” (p. 41).

Psychology research supports the liberatory potential of self-labeling. In a series of experiments, researchers tested the effect on marginalized people and on others' perception of marginalized people when the marginalized reappropriated a derogatory slur used by the dominant culture. The researchers found that reappropriation can “weaken the label's stigmatizing force” (Galinsky et al., 2013, p. 2020). However, one of the central variables was the feeling of group power. Reappropriation of a term was easier when an individual felt the group to which they belonged was powerful. In other words, resignification requires collective action, not just a personal decision.

**Strategic Essentialism and Rhetorics of Difference**

Often, those who are most marginalized are those most strongly denied a language with which to speak. Yet when challenging oppressions, many people choose to speak from the very identity ingredient that has been the basis of their oppression. When people speak as women, as people of color, as queer, as third-world women, as indigenous people, they thematize their named identities as a legitimizing force of their rhetoric.

The relationship between identity categories and political action is complex. Although we are wary about claims of some innate or biological sense of identity, we also recognize that each person is categorized and that those categories have real effects. Even if there is no biological foundation to race, people categorized as Black, Hispanic, Arab, Asian, and Native American are subjected to stereotypes on the basis of that categorization. Regarding sex, even if the differences between women and men are infinitesimal, people treat men and women as different. Identity categories might be artificial, but they have real, material effects. Given that linguistic categories of identity difference do exist, how might they be challenged? One way is to be constantly vigilant about whether the perception of differences is warranted. Another way is to engage in what Gayatri Spivak (1996) called *strategic essentialism* (pp. 159, 214).
Strategic essentialism refers to the intentional embrace and foregrounding of an identity ingredient as definitive of a group's identity for a political purpose and has two important characteristics: (1) the so-called essential attributes of the group are defined by the group members themselves, and (2) even as group members engage in essentialism, they recognize that it is always an artificial construct. They do not deny they are a group but, instead, seek to control what it means to be part of that group. This reclaims agency. Jaqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1997) explained: “Agency is . . . the conscious and ongoing reproduction of the terms of one's existence while taking responsibility for this process” (p. xxviii). Marginalized people become actors instead of the acted upon.

Even as scholars recognize that identities are fluid and contingent, and that clinging to them carries danger, scholars also understand “identities as relational and grounded in the historically produced social facts which constitute social locations” (Moya, 1997, p. 127). Identities matter insofar as they determine where a person fits within the social order as it presently exists. When one is positioned at the margin, this does not mean that one automatically articulates counterdiscourses but that such a person can provide a location from which a group oppositionally can “provide us with a critical perspective from which we can disclose the complicated workings of ideology and oppression” (p. 128). English professor Paula M. L. Moya (1997) argued that the external construction of identities influences experiences, and those experiences then inform what people know and how they know it. Moya urged everyone to remember that although “people are not uniformly determined by any one social fact, . . . social facts (such as gender and race)” do influence who we are (p. 132).

Communication scholar Lisa Flores's (1996) study of Chicanas' development of a rhetorical homeland illustrated strategic essentialism in the form of rhetorics of difference. Flores examined how Chicana feminists' creative works participated in rhetorics of difference by creating a discursive space, distinct from the liminal borderlands in which they live—the space between the United States and Mexico that Chicana lesbian feminist Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) described as where the “Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (p. 3). Flores explained that because Chicana feminists live between worlds—physically unwanted in the United States and not wanting to return to Mexico, emotionally seeking the safety of family while seeking respect as women—they must create their own homeland.

The development of a space of belonging, where they can assert agency in relation to their identity, cannot occur in the public sphere given their limited access to it, so Chicana feminists turn to what Flores (1996) called private discourse: “Through the rejection of the external and creation of the internal, marginalized groups establish themselves as different from stereotyped perceptions and different from dominant culture” (p. 145). Importantly, Chicana feminists do not remain an insular group. After they “carv[e] out a space within which they can find their own voice . . . they begin to turn it into a home where connections to those within their families are made strong” (p. 146). Once the homeland is firmly established, “recognizing their still existing connections to various other groups, Chicana feminists construct bridges or pathways connecting them with others” (p. 146).
Even as people strategically appeal to essential identities as locations from which to develop knowledge, create solidarity, and resist dominant definitions, the identities should always be critically examined. Sometimes the identities are strongly embraced to create a sense of belonging. Other times, some identity ingredients are deemphasized so that alliances can be built on the basis of other ingredients. Gloria Anzaldúa (1990) elegantly described this multilayered process as creating bridges, drawbridges, sandbars, or islands. Even as groups build bridges to others, sometimes moments of separation are needed, and the drawbridge is raised.

Although many attempt to use strategic essentialism, its political success is not guaranteed. Spivak (1993) claimed the strategy “has served its purpose” (p. 17), but others still advocate it. One of the concerns is that even if people are conscious of their participation in essentialism, “strategic essentialism keeps alive the image of a homogeneous, static, and essential third-world culture” and can also limit people to only claiming knowledge about the identity they embrace (Lee, 2011, p. 265). The question remains: Do the short-term political benefits outweigh the long-term costs of accepting reductive definitions of self (Eide, 2010, p. 76; Lee, 2011, p. 265)?

Moving Over

Building alliances and creating solidarity across identity categories is a good thing. However, whenever one seeks to represent others, one must be attentive to how one speaks for, about, or in solidarity with that other. The issue of who can speak for whom is complex. Those working in solidarity with marginalized groups have long grappled with it. English professors Judith Roof and Robyn Weigman (1995) edited a collection of essays that address this very issue, *Who Can Speak? Authority and Critical Identity*. In it, scholars explored the problems presented by the act of speaking for others. When a White, college-educated, middle-class, Christian ciswoman who is a U.S. citizen claims to speak for all women, she potentially erases most other women. This woman’s concerns are probably not identical to those of a third-world, poor, Muslim transwoman of color. Members of a privileged group also may erase others when they seek economic advantage by passing themselves off as members of a marginal group. People need to be wary of instances of speaking for others, because it

is often born of a desire for mastery, to privilege oneself as the one who more correctly understands the truth about another’s situation or as the one who can champion a just cause and thus achieve glory and praise. The effect of the practice of speaking for others is often, though not always, erasure and a reinscription of sexual, national, and other kinds of hierarchies. (Alcoff, 1995, p. 116)

However, this should not be taken as an excuse to not speak: “Even a complete retreat from speech is of course not neutral since it allows the continued dominance of current discourses and acts by omission to reinforce their dominance” (Alcoff, 1995, p. 108). Sometimes, when a group cannot speak for itself (e.g., due to political
repression, lack of time or resources), then those with power have a responsibility to speak. Philosopher Linda Alcoff (1995) explained,

A retreat from speaking for will not result in an increase in receptive listening in all cases; it may result merely in a retreat into a narcissistic yuppies lifestyle in which a privileged person takes no responsibility whatsoever for her society. (p. 107)

People need to carefully reflect on when, and for whom, they speak, yet speak they must.

**Moving over** refers to the conscious choice to silence oneself and create space for others to talk. An interesting case exists in which a race-privileged person stepped aside when asked by those for/as whom she was speaking. Anne Cameron, a well-known White Canadian author, wrote first-person accounts of the lives of Native Canadian women. Lee Maracle, a Canadian author of Salish and Cree ancestry and a member of the Stó:lō Nation, was sent as a spokesperson for a group of writers who met and decided to ask Cameron to “move over” at the 1988 International Feminist Book Fair in Montreal. When asked, Cameron did, indeed, move over (Maracle, 1989, p. 10).

The Native women’s concern was that as long as Whites writing as Native women filled stores’ bookshelves, no room was left for Native women. Maracle (1989) explained, “So few Canadians want to read about us that there is little room for Native books. . . . If Anne takes up that space there is no room for us at all” (p. 10). This example is fascinating because of the deep level of respect everyone involved had for each other. Maracle and the other Native Canadian women did not see Cameron as their enemy, and Cameron understood the basis of the request and honored it. The point is that sometimes material realities (monies for publishing, contracts, space on bookstore shelves) can inhibit the possibilities of the marginalized to be heard. People with privilege, whether race, class, sex, nationality, or religion, may need to step aside, move over, and make space when others wish to speak.

**Conclusion**

This chapter is not about being politically correct but about being an ethical, conscious, critical, and inventive communicator. Language is fun, fascinating, and of real consequence. Learning to speak clearly, vividly, passionately, and with joy is not drudgery. However, even as we play with language, we still must recognize that rules exist. Almost everyone is familiar with Robert Fulghum’s (2004) book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* and its list of rules. The first few are “Share everything. Play fair. Don’t hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don’t take things that aren’t yours. Say you’re sorry when you hurt somebody” (p. 2). Although most people may have learned these rules in kindergarten, translating them into language rules may not happen until later (college, maybe?).

Here is our playful reinterpretation of the rules. Like Anne Cameron, share, even if it means moving over. Be fair in the way you describe the world, giving all people
recognition of their existence by avoiding the falsely universal we and sexist language.
Do not use violent language. When you use words borrowed from another, make sure
you make clear where you found them. If your language is messy, imprecise, or causes
messes because it is violent or uses truncated passives, clean up your language. If a
term has a specific meaning as part of a coculture, do not use it unless granted per-
mission. And should you ever hurt someone with your language, apologize. Sticks
and stones may break bones, and words may break spirits.

Understanding the power of language requires all language users to be more con-
scious of the words they use and the worlds they construct. Native Canadian author
Jeanette Armstrong (1990) outlined a powerful language ethic held by Native people:

When you speak, . . . you not only have to assume responsibility for speaking
those words, but you are responsible for the effect of those words on the per-
son you are addressing and the thousands of years of tribal memory packed
into your understanding of those words. So, when you speak, you need to
know what you are speaking about. You need to perceive or imagine the
impact of your words on the listener and understand the responsibility that
goes with being a speaker. (pp. 27–28)

Even though Armstrong described one nation’s ethic, Armstrong believed respon-
sibility is shared by all who use language:

We are all responsible in that way. We are all thinking people. We all have that
ability and we all have that responsibility. We may not want to have that respon-
sibility or we may feel unworthy of that responsibility, but every time we speak
we have that responsibility. Everything we say affects someone, someone is hear-
ing it, someone is understanding it, someone is going to take it and it becomes
memory. We are all powerful, each one of us individually. We are able to make
things change, to make things happen differently. We are all able to heal. (p. 29)

Sometimes, a person may use a term and not recognize that its meaning may have
moved on. Mistakes do happen, but as Alcoff (1995) was quick to remind, “a partial
loss of control does not entail a complete loss of accountability” (p. 105).

So speak, speak out, speak loudly, speak softly, speak kindly, speak kindness,
play with what you speak, speak playfully, speak in solidarity with others, speak
with power, speak truth to power, speak back to power, talk back, talk.

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Discussion Questions

1. Why is recognizing both the liberatory and oppressive potential of language important?

2. What is the ethical debate regarding “speaking for others”? How do the authors suggest we address the debate? Do you agree or disagree and why?

3. For each language form that constrains outlined in the chapter, find one example in contemporary discourse.

4. Do you think resignification is possible? Why or why not? Why would some groups or people choose such a strategy?