

LANGUAGE AND ETHNICITY**Hristina Miteva Tanaskoska**

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Abstract: I would begin with a quotation by Cynthia Ozick: ‘‘Language makes cultures, and we make a rotten culture when we abuse words.’’ Prejudice and discrimination arise from our lack of understanding of the history, experiences, and cultural values of ethnic groups. As a result we are quick to stereotype groups of people. The language that is used often reflects one’s personal opinion and prejudice and very often than not it unfortunately reflects a prejudice handed down through generations of our society. A lot of writers have argued on the sensitive issue of the English language and its prejudice to the African Americans. Ossie Davis is one of them and his belief that the English language is his enemy is supported by undisputable facts. First, it is due to the fact that the word Blackness has 120 synonyms, 60 of which are distinctly unfavorable. One word in particular is still considered to be the filthiest, the nastiest, dirtiest word in the English language. A peculiar fact is present. Many African Americans address to each other as ‘‘niggers’’. The word seems like it has found its everyday use but with a bit of a change and that is ‘‘nigga’’. Some people think that there is a difference between nigger and nigga and that ‘‘nigga’’ was used among close friends. But as Nelson says: ‘‘no matter what is done to the last syllable it does not soften the blow of a word used to humiliate and dehumanise blacks. I also share an opinion that by using this word they are making a damaging step backwards. Langston Hughes, one of the famous Harlem Renaissance writers, wrote ‘‘I look ahead and I see my race blossoming like the rose...’’. Nevertheless, until African Americans wake up and see what they are doing that rose is nothing but a dying weed thirsty for self – respect. For blacks to refer to themselves in this way is hypocritical, absurd and contradictive. They want equality, it is often claimed how important it is to maintain their culture and identity and yet use this notorious racist word. The everyday use of it can create an atmosphere of acceptance meaning if they use it why not use it everybody else. How many jokes have we heard regarding Jews? The message in each of them is clear, whether said in English, Macedonian or any other language. They are always shown as money-hungry people with no moral restraints who will go to great lengths for financial gain. Jokes about any ethnic group communicate negative stereotypes that become more credible with each telling. To sum up, language is immensely powerful tool, a tool which cannot be seen but much more harmful than many other weapons. It can assign respect also, status, and value as well as insult, mock, and discrimination. We must choose our language otherwise we perpetuate an inaccurate and unfair view of the world and the people who live in.

Keywords: prejudice, mock, stereotypes, discrimination, racist, ethnicity, equality, respect, understanding

1. INTRODUCTION

I would begin with a quotation by Cynthia Ozick: ‘‘Language makes cultures, and we make a rotten culture when we abuse words.’’ Prejudice and discrimination arise from our lack of understanding of the history, experiences, and cultural values of ethnic groups. As a result we are quick to stereotype groups of people. The language that is used often reflects one’s personal opinion and prejudice and very often than not it unfortunately reflects a prejudice handed down through generations of our society. For an illustration one may choose to say ‘‘pardon my French’’ and assume that he has shown good manners when in fact reflects the way English thought and spoke about the French for centuries. It is certainly incorrect to even imagine that the French are rude, impolite people who use bad language. Nevertheless, the expression is still very much in use. Having in mind that The United States of America and Macedonia are multiethnic and multicultural countries, in the following parts several ethnical groups will be mentioned and a discussion on the English and Macedonian language prejudice towards these will be argued.

2. ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND AFRICAN AMERICANS

A lot of writers have argued on the sensitive issue of the English language and its prejudice to the African Americans. Ossie Davis is one of them and his belief that the English language is his enemy is supported by undisputable facts. First, it is due to the fact that the word Blackness has 120 synonyms, 60 of which are distinctly unfavorable. Among the offending 60 were such words as: blot, blotch, obscure, murky, sinister, evil, deadly, wicked, darkly, blackmoor etc. ‘‘Any teacher good or bad, white or black, Jew or Gentile, who uses the English Language as a medium of communication is forced, willy-nilly, to teach the Negro Child 60 ways to despise himself and the white child 60 ways to aid and abet him in the crime,’’ (Davis, 1967). However when money is concerned or bank accounts, being in the black is actually a good thing, but this is probably only one of the very few exceptions where black would refer to something positive. There is nothing wrong and certainly nothing bad about being Black. ‘‘Black is beautiful!’’ This is most likely the most famous slogan of the Civil rights movement in the 1960s and used and followed many years

later. This was the time when African Americans began to become more self-conscious, self-confident, they began to think about their origin, their roots and most important they realised that one should be proud to be Black not ashamed or feel inferior. One word in particular is still considered to be the filthiest, the nastiest, dirtiest word in the English language. It is not unusual to hear this word in some songs for example, but luckily they could be censored, or substituted by a more suitable word. A peculiar fact is present. Many African Americans address to each other as “niggers”. The word seems like it has found its everyday use but with a bit of a change and that is “nigga”. Some people think that there is a difference between “nigger” and “nigga” and that “nigga” was used among close friends. But as Nelson says: “No matter what is done to the last syllable it does not soften the blow of a word used to humiliate and dehumanise blacks. I also share an opinion that by using this word they are making a damaging step backwards. Langston Hughes, one of the famous Harlem Renaissance writers, wrote “I look ahead and I see my race blossoming like the rose...”. Nevertheless, until African Americans wake up and see what they are doing that rose is nothing but a dying weed thirsty for self-respect. For blacks to refer to themselves in this way is hypocritical, absurd and contradictory. They want equality, it is often claimed how important it is to maintain their culture and identity and yet use this notorious racist word. The everyday use of it can create an atmosphere of acceptance meaning if they use it why not use it everybody else. When talking about the Macedonian equivalent there is also a debate. Our term “crnc” and “crnkinja” are more close to the English word “blacks”. The word “crncuga” is more close to “nigger”. Since there is no counterpart for African American, except maybe Afrikanski Amerikanec, „crnc,, and „ crnkinja ,, are used with no intention to offend. Sometimes African Americans can be referred to as “the people with dark skin or from the black race. However, if “crncuga” is used than it is meant to insult.

3. ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND THE NATIVE AMERICANS

Things are no better for the Native Americans as well. In the Macedonian language it could be said “starosedelcete na Amerika ili domorodnoto naselenie” (natives) but it is very rarely used. “Indijanci” (Indians) is the term applied when talking about this ethnic group. For more than 30 years the debate has been going over whether names such as Redskins, Chiefs, Braves honor or defile Native Americans. There was a debate whether the mascots by high schools, college, and professional teams are an insult or a tribute. It seems that the majority of the Native American population has no problem with the teams names. There is a division among opinion. Could it be something similar to the use of the word “nigger”, among African Americans? Is it possible that because most of the Native Americans live in reservations, do not have the opportunity to obtain a high education, or have deeper insight of certain issues or their self-esteem has fallen so low that they do not even know when they are being insulted.

4. ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND JEWS

How many jokes have we heard regarding Jews? The message in each of them is clear, whether said in English, Macedonian or any other language. They are always shown as money-hungry people with no moral restraints who will go to great lengths for financial gain. Are these just jokes? Should we laugh at them? How would we feel if someone decided to make jokes about Macedonians, or English... etc. Jokes about any ethnic group communicate negative stereotypes that become more credible with each telling. There are a lot of words in English with “jew” prefixes and they usually manifest the previously mentioned stereotypes about Jewish people. Unfortunately, in Macedonia you could still hear somebody says bad words and swears and insulting someone by saying: “you are such a Jew” or “Get out of here you mean Jew” or “Do not be such a Jew, let me have this for a lower price”. Since there are not many Jews in Macedonia, the stereotype of the Jews was replaced by the one of The Aromans, the descendants of the nomadic tribes, tribes of old Vlachko and Moldavia countries whose territory is now a part of the country of Romania. It is like the comparison of being mean with money wasn't enough, but the word “Cincar” had to be invented.

5. ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LATIN AMERICANS

When people who live in USA from Mexican, Cuban, Argentinian... etc origin are concerned, we are being presented with a delicate issue of how to call them. It is the same situation in Macedonian language, as well as in English. Are they Mexican Americans? Yes, the majority are from Mexico but what about those from Puerto Rico for example, they are not Mexicans. Should we call them Hispanic? There is a debate on the existence of the word. It does not reflect the origin, it is just a reminder that they were colonies of Spain. What about “Latino”? Many people whom this issue really concerns the most, refuse to be called like this stating that it has nothing to do with them. It just signals the time when Spain and Portugal were conquered by the Romans. Another term is in use and that is Chicano. When Macedonian language is concerned we use the name of Latin America, and people of Latin origin. But we should bear in mind that this is only when we talk about the population of a country and all of them are referred as Latin Americans or Latinos. Otherwise they are called by their native country respectfully.

5. ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND MUSLIMS

Last but certainly not the least important is the language prejudice towards Muslims and the stereotypes about them. Especially after September 11 things have gone worse than ever. In Macedonia that would be after 2001. Ignorant people quickly jump into conclusions that the Muslims are savages, hostile, hostile to each other especially to their women. Muslims are mistaken to be brainwashed, medieval, dirty ... etc. The language itself reflects this by the use of negative adjectives when talking about Muslim people. Roma people are regularly ridiculed in Macedonia. We can hear sentences like: "Aj sega ke pravime ciganska rabota" (Come on we are not gonna make a gypsy thing out of it, are we?) or we simply do not like a certain blouse or any other thing we can often hear "This is so gypsy like" which in Macedonian sounds even more offensive "Ej ova e prava ciganarija". One may think that this is not offensive, however we can not judge what is harmful or not to a person until we put ourselves into their shoes.

6. CONCLUSION

Language is an immensely powerful tool, a tool which cannot be seen but much more harmful than many other weapons. It can assign respect, status, and value as well as insult, mock, and discrimination. We must choose our language otherwise we perpetuate an inaccurate and unfair view of the world and the people who live in it. In conclusion, I would share some famous quotations by famous authors in the field of language:

- "The language of friendship is not words but meanings". (Henry David Thoreau)
- A language is not just words. It's a culture, a tradition, a unification of a community, a whole history that creates what a community is. It's all embodied in a language. (Noam Chomsky)
- Language is power, life and the instrument of domination and liberation. (Angela Carter)
- Language is the road map of a culture. It tells you where its people come from and where they are going. (Rita Mae Brown)
- Language is a city to the building of which every human being brought a stone. (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

Last but certainly not the least, an in-depth sight and thought by The Dalai Lama which can serve as a guiding idea to all of us; "Whether one is rich or poor, educated or illiterate, religious or nonbelieving, man or woman, black, white, or brown, we are all the same. Physically, emotionally, and mentally, we are all equal. We all share basic needs for food, shelter, safety, and love. We all aspire to happiness and we all shun suffering. Each of us has hopes, worries, fears, and dreams. Each of us wants the best for our family and loved ones. We all experience pain when we suffer loss and joy when we achieve what we seek. On this fundamental level, religion, ethnicity, culture, and language make no difference."

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