

The Power of a Word by Charlotte Vangsnes

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“A picture says more than a thousand words.” The person who came up with that saying probably never experienced the enormous power a single word can have on an individual. A single word uttered by someone you love can be the most treasured moment of your life. A single word conveyed with the purpose of insult can be the worst experience of your life. Then there is every word in between, every single one of them able to impact another human’s specter of feeling, whether used in the right or wrong context. A word can mean something completely different from one person to another. Community, culture and context play an important and crucial role in the interpretation of a word, and contribute to declaring a word either socially acceptable or unacceptable. Three writers Lucia Perillo, Gloria Naylor, and Beverly Gross all have different backgrounds and strong opinions on the meaning of a word. Perillo purposely adopted a rather careless attitude towards the power of a word. Naylor thinks the context of a word is probably more important than the word itself. And Gross goes deeper into the history of a word, exploring how an intended insult can even be an advantage.

The most discussed and debated words are often the ones that cause the most harm. Intentional insults, whether spoken or written, are therefore the words of a language that arouse the strongest reaction. These words often arise to describe a person who stands out from the majority in some way. Essayist and journalist Lucia Perillo describes herself as one of these people. In her essay “Cripple: The Meaning of a Word,” she discusses the different words used to

describe a person with a handicap. Perillo is an authority on the subject, because she has multiple sclerosis. Rather than viewing the word *cripple* as an offence, Perillo embraces and accepts it; "Sometimes I call myself *cripple*" (155). The word *cripple* is not usually a socially accepted word, but Perillo sees no restrictions attached to the word. She explains that the reason for this is because she views herself as "As a member of the population to which the word applies" (155). By possessing a handicap, Perillo either willingly or unwillingly becomes a member of a community. The "rules" within a community are often different from the rest of the world. Within a distinct community, a word like *cripple* can therefore be socially accepted.

The culture in a community creates a common language for the individuals involved, often with words, and meanings of words, that outsiders either do not have in their vocabulary or interpret differently. Gloria Naylor is an African-American novelist, who discusses the meanings of a word in different communities and contexts in the article "The Meaning of a Word". She tells the story of the first time she heard the word *nigger* said by a boy in her class. "I didn't know what a nigger was", she writes, and by the context she understood that, "But whatever it meant, it was something he shouldn't have called me" (140). Later on though, Naylor comes to the conclusion that she had probably heard the word before, but never paid much attention to it, because the context was friendly amongst family and friends rather than hostile when it was spoken by the boy in the classroom. "It was set within context and inflection that caused it to register in my mind as something else" she interprets (140). Even though *nigger* is a word most people would not dream of using in their daily vocabulary,

it was not “An internalization of racism” in Naylor’s opinion when used by her family and friends (141). This shows that a word can be accepted in certain cultures, even though it is not socially accepted in the broader definition. But difficulties arise with knowing how, when, and by whom these emotionally charged words are acceptable and unacceptable.

Words with negative intentions can arise in several situations.

Feeling the need to put someone down is one situation, and is often triggered by feeling threatened by a person or a group. Professor of English Beverly Gross explored the history of the meaning of the word *bitch* in the article “Bitch”. She researched countless definitions of the word, from the late 18th century until today, from family and friends to scholars. Gross discovered that not only has the meaning of the word changed over time, but also the power of the word. *Bitch* does not appear to have the same strong impact today as it originally had. Her studies of the word *bitch* showed that the word is almost without exception used to put a woman down, often a woman with power, competitive personality and self-centered views. “Its meaning matters less than its power to denounce and subjugate”, Gross writes (45). The person uttering the word *bitch*, and the context of the situation, is as important, or maybe more important to interpret than the actual word. Gross states that; “Bitch means to men whatever they find threatening in a woman”, which is why they would use the word *bitch* to suppress women, “And it means to women whatever they particularly dislike about themselves” (46). Gross is therefore giving the power to interpret the word *bitch* to the women of the world, which might be the reason for the words decreasing power in its history.

Even though their histories and reasons for discussing the meaning of a word are very different, the three writers make several similar points. Perillo's careless attitude towards the word *cripple* can in no way be considered unacceptable when she uses it to describe herself. But she would most likely not use the word *cripple* to describe another person with a handicap, even though she herself is an authority on the subject. Being African-American, Naylor too is an authority on the word *nigger*. Rather than taking offence at the word, Naylor observes that her family and friends; "Took a word whites used to signify worthlessness or degradation and rendered it impotent" by using it casually in their own community (141). Gross also shows how the word *bitch* is losing its power as a consequence of women turning the intended suppression negligible. She concludes her article using the example of female artist Madonna, stating that, "Madonna has appropriated the word and turned the intended insult to her advantage" (52). Perillo, too, turned the word *cripple* into an acceptable word in her own vocabulary, and Naylor's family signified the word *nigger* worthless. Gross and Madonna stress the right and importance of "Expressing yourself", and make the point that indifference can be as powerful as an insult (52). In their own way, all three writers found a way to eliminate the edge and intended insult of emotionally charged words. In most cases, context is everything.

Work Cited

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