Spoken Spaces:

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE IN EXCLUDING PLACES

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With a constantly changing and increasingly technological reality, we are continuously looking into an incredibly interconnected world and trying to find a place within it. The ways these spaces are created, filled, opened, gatekept and divided is often not done overtly. The nuances and subtleties that permeate everyday life dictate how and when we interact with society. Language is a key force behind this, as it acts as a connotative indicator of where people are and are not welcome. Countless aspects of daily life are impacted by the boundaries and expectations enforced by language, but this is most clearly seen through the gender in the workplace, discussions of race and the experiences of people in the LGBTQ+ community.

The experience of women in the workplace is one that has been burdened by gendered expectations, glass ceilings, wage gaps and inequality. Even as progress has been made, language casts a normative shadow that dictates how women are treated and expected to act. This divisive language often takes the form of patronization and tone policing, according to equalrights.org.

It is not uncommon for women to be referred to with diminishing, paternalistic terms like "honey," "babe" or "sweetie," even in professional contexts. By contrast, their male counterparts are not subject to this kind of dialogue. The use of these terms is not innocuous — they enforce an unspoken hierarchy that subverts the qualifications, expertise and authority of women.

In the workplace, even when women are not undermined by others, they are expected to undermine themselves. Tone policing is undeniably common in the way women interact with society, especially in career and academic settings. In meetings or dialogue, women soften their approach to conversation, punctuating sentences with, "I'm not sure if that makes sense," "I think that..." or "I'm sorry." This reluctance to assert themselves is a direct result of what would happen if they did; women who act and speak in the same way as men are often labeled as "bitchy" or "domineering" instead of "confident" or "direct."

Women are expected to watch their tone in professional emails as well, softening their messages with phrases like "could you please," "it looks like," "thank you so much" and an excessive use of exclamation points. Without these fillers, they are often perceived as aggressive or hostile, while men using the same language would not be subject to those same judgments. These double standards created and enforced by language force women to undermine themselves, which in turn reinforces the gender inequalities in upward mobility within workplace settings.

These subtleties in the way people use language bleed into how others are spoken about. While racism is not always overt, it is hyper-present in coded language. By coding racist language, the phrasing is softened but the meaning remains and perpetuates prejudice throughout society according to neaedjustice.org.

Consider the casual ways we code geographic areas with racist language. When someone describes a part of the city with higher Black populations, they might unfairly use words like "sketchy," "dangerous" or "underdeveloped" in their justification for avoiding the area. In the media, Black men are often referred to as "thugs" or "criminals" while their white counterparts are not labeled the same.

The Black Lives Matter protests offer a stark example of

this—over the summer, the media focused on the "looting" from protestors depicted as violent criminals. But in January, when there was an insurrection at the Capitol, conservative news outlets applauded Trump expressing his love and asking the rioters to go home in peace. Language is a key way that prejudice and bias are perpetuated, indicating the deep roots of power structures that keep oppressed groups from reaching equality.

The use of language as a tool for oppression is evident not only in nuance, but in silence. In the LGBTQ+ community, the history of exclusion from the church and hatred from Christians hangs heavy. However, marriage equality and an undeniable growth in acceptance has shed light on the exclusion of queer voices and phrases from mainstream culture. Now, the continued use of a language shared only by the community contributes to their own erasure, as it allows straight people to ignore their experience. While nuances in language actively contribute to inequality, language has vast potential to work toward inclusion, and this is already occurring across disciplines. It has become common in many spaces, particularly in academia, to ask for and share pronouns. In addition to this, gender neutral terms are becoming more commonplace, as "guests," "friends" and "partner" replace "ladies and gentlemen," "guys and girls" and "girlfriend and boyfriend." While these differences might not be impactful for cisgender people, the omission of gendered terms and increased respect for pronouns creates an inclusive space for trans, nonbinary and gender non-conforming people.

The emergence of person-first language is another example of the weight language carries. Instead of addressing or referring to someone with their diagnosis first, such as an "autistic person," person-first language implies just that: prioritizing the personage by using "person with autism." This shift emphasizes the dignity and humanity of people with disabilities.

Inclusive language like this is seen along racial lines as well, as terms like "POC" or "BIPOC" for "people of color" and "Black and Indigenous people of color" have become more common. These terms are more inclusive and racially sensitive, and create a respectful space for conversations about race.

The push for inclusivity surrounding language has made great strides—English is constantly evolving and the desire to approach it with sensitivity in itself is a mark of progress. In doing this, however, the use of inclusive language can quickly shift to virtue signaling; instead of committing to sustained action, people use the "right" language and end their activism there. But using "POC" simply is not the same as volunteering, donating to mutual aid or working on becoming more anti-racist.

Language should be the culmination of a larger body of work—inclusive word choice is a conduit for connection with previously excluded people. Language bridges the gap between individuals' work on personal mindsets of inclusion and the way that this work is communicated with others.