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Why Study Language? Discussing Language and its Influence on Gender Discrimination

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Why Study Language:
Language and Discrimination
Katelyn Eisenmann
HNRS 4990 Final Document
Bowling Green State University
Spring 2019

Introduction

This project has taken on many forms throughout the development phase. Originally, I started with the intent to take experiences from my year abroad in France and use them to bring new insight to the Bowling Green community. I have remained true in this endeavor, in that my time abroad greatly influenced the topics treated in my project however, the project itself has evolved into something that extends beyond a study abroad experience narrative and into a socio-cultural analysis of power dynamics in our society. While studying in France, I became a student of linguistics and was asked to critically examine the very structure on which language is founded. We explored the history of languages and the ways that languages have evolved from contact and geography. Despite my many years of being a student of languages, I had never before looked at language in this way, as a science. My linguistics courses ignited a curiosity in me, and I began thinking more analytically about the ways in which language is diffused into every aspect of our lives.

Concurrently, I was becoming a global citizen during my time abroad. I began to see the differences in perspectives of global politics at an intimate level. American politics were no longer a broad debate that I was vaguely related to; politics were now a concrete idea that I was constantly asked to explain and defend. I became more aware of my own personal politics, and of the ways that my upbringing and education have shaped them. I began to think about how people can have such wildly differing opinions on topics, and again I was forced to look at language. The word choice, register, and nationality associated with policy is extremely influential in deciding who will be affected by position A versus position B. I realized that a

large part of how willing and able we are to understand an argument relies heavily on the language used in its presentation. This realization led me to believe that language can have a larger effect on our attitudes than we realize, and I began to question where in the world I could see the effects of this phenomenon.

The most compelling question that kept rolling around my mind was that of transgender rights. I noticed among my friend group of French students that trans-rights weren't as heavily discussed or even remarked upon at all. Granted, I run in generally left-wing circles at home and am involved in groups that promote inclusive environments, but I couldn't believe that there wasn't a debate at all. At this time, I was enrolled in a current events course designed to explain French culture and politics to exchange students, and, in this course, we discussed an inclusive language system that had been introduced in France. Like many romance languages, French is entirely bound to a gender-binary within its very grammar. There is no way to express a thought in French and allow the gender of objects and people to be entirely vague. At some point a decision must always be made. The inclusive language movement in France was quickly struck down by the national government, as it was "lacking clarity" and "ugly." This made me wonder if the reason why my peers and friends in France never seemed to discuss transgender and non-binary rights or even identified within those communities was due to the very structure of the language in which they were born.

Throughout the entirety of my time abroad, I pondered and stewed over this question, and started to research whether your maternal language can actually influence the way that you think. I started researching different theories of linguistics, to see if anyone else had this same question. This search led me to Guy Deutscher's book, *Through the Language Glass*, in which he makes the argument that the language we are raised in can influence the way we think about the world

around us, citing concepts like the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, or the perception of colors in *The Odyssey*, to show how our mother tongue can shape our thinking. Deutscher's book compelled me to think more critically about the ways in which language can persuade and mold the attitude of a society, eventually leading to research on the politics surrounding gender and how language can play a decisive role.

From this point, I started looking at the rich linguistic environment that was available to me during my experience abroad. I listened more carefully to those around me, analyzing French and English communication alike across a wide array of nationalities. I noticed that those who spoke English natively, regardless of their nationality, tended to struggle with correctly gendering nouns in French and also tended to have more open mindsets concerning gender. Even if they were not personally non-binary or did not recognize non-binary as a valid identity, they'd at least heard of the concept and understood the debate at hand. This is where my honors project topic started to become clear to me: I knew I had to tackle this intersection of attitude towards gender identities and maternal language in some way, but it was bigger than just "do the French believe in transgender and non-binary rights?" I began a quest to discover how language can support and influence societal norms, and to show the unseen political nature of our everyday language use. I felt that the only way to properly tackle this quest was to create a space for open discussion, where various members of the BGSU community could come together to share their opinions and experiences with their own personal language use. This is how I came to the conclusion that a panel discussion during the spring semester would be the best method of making my project accessible and productive for not just myself, but for other honors students and BGSU community members as well.

Research Questions

- In what ways do language and culture relate to and impact one another?
- How does language function as a political tool and enforcer of societal change?
- In what ways do language use and structure contribute to attitudes and perceptions of gender in various societies?
- What are the politics that surround concepts of gender and sex?
- How does language persuade and inform the way we think about certain concepts?
- How can I facilitate a meaningful discussion that will address the intersections of language and culture in people's attitudes towards gender issues?

These are the guiding questions that I have used to focus my research during the development process of my project. The research questions I have created have helped me to navigate the types of research that I am reading and reviewing and will hopefully help to shape the panel discussion in the spring semester. I have made some questions intentionally broad in order for the conversation to have the potential to extend into related topics while still remaining centered on the main topic of transgender and non-binary acceptance within society and the impact that our language use and structure has on that acceptance. The most important decision that I will make in preparation for this event will be choosing the panel speakers. I intend to fill the panel with both faculty members and students of various disciplines in order to gain a well-rounded and diverse number of perspectives, in the hope that this will produce a conversation that leads the BGSU community to think more critically about their own language use.

Literature Review

As previously mentioned, this project originated with my initial reading of the book *Through the Language Glass*, by Guy Deutscher. In his book, Deutscher recounts to the reader tales of curious language use and describes their implications for the field of linguistics. This book explores the ways that language has evolved and seeks to answer the question: does our maternal language shape the way that we think? Deutscher's use of anecdotal evidence helps to show both the evolution of language, and the underlying cultural nuances that exist, often unseen, within our language. He also presented the idea of Linguistic Relativity, also known as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, which acts as a foundation for Deutscher's argument that language can shape our thinking. This hypothesis and the book by Deutscher both fascinated me, and from their arguments I began to formulate an idea of what my honors project might become.

From this original inspiration, I began to delve deeper into the study of sociolinguistics, casually at first. I started listening to podcasts like *The World in Words*, and seeking articles that related to the intersection of language and culture. I found that this issue is heavily tied to personal politics, and that certain researchers have found that language itself is inherently political (Joseph, 2006). Many of the podcasts and articles I found online that were created to be easily digestible by anyone regardless of their academic background presented this topic of linguistic discrimination as an opportunity for advocacy (PRI, 2018, Cox & Porzucki, 2018). I discovered that there is a growing emphasis on the use of language in the continued marginalization of individuals expressing gender identities outside of the cis-gender binary, specifically those who are female presenting.

This extended my research into the gender studies discipline, and I attempted to find research that explained gender-based discrimination while maintaining the sociolinguistic

perspective. Using Abbou & Baider (2016), and Dale Spender's 1998 book *Man Made Language*, I began to formulate questions surrounding the ways that the structural gendering of languages can lead to gender discrimination and the continued hegemonic support of the patriarchy by men and women alike. I chose these two specific pieces because Abbou & Baider's work is much less subjective than that of Spender's book, but both include important accounts of how concepts from gender studies and linguistics intertwine to create societal reactions.

My main concern in finding literature to support this project was to be conscious of the type of resources I was utilizing, and the social standpoint of the authors. I included the voices of women, people of color, academic professionals, and curious citizens. The literature review and annotated bibliography have been the most difficult portion of HNRS 4980, because my research has not been entirely concluded and will continue throughout the year. This includes my own personal research as well as instances where course materials coincidentally appear in my coursework, as I have discovered that the interdisciplinary applications of this research is seemingly endless.

Methodology

Being that this project is not the typical research paper or study, my methodology will differ greatly from some of my peers. My project's development has occurred in a few simultaneous stages: research, event planning, outreach, and brainstorming. The first step in this endeavor was reading and listening to everything I could get my hands on, and seeing what those in the linguistics and gender studies fields had already brought into light. I began researching not only the topic of gender discrimination and its linguistic influences, but also effective methods for hosting an event of this nature. This included researching how to create a call for submissions, and the differences between a round table and a panel discussion. I am finding

myself playing multiple roles in this process: project manager, researcher, event coordinator, public relations strategist, and these roles are all shaping the way that my project continues to evolve.

As for the spring semester, I intend to create marketing materials for the event and focus on creating incentives for students and faculty alike to engage with this discussion. This process will include inviting honors classes to the discussion, submitting event advertisements to Campus Update, and creating a poster to display in various campus locations. Alongside these outreach efforts, I will be creating materials such as guiding questions and informational packets to help facilitate the discussion, as well as writing an introductory speech to open the event. After the event has been held, I intend to write a reflection piece explaining my personal feelings about the event and the insight I have gained on the topic throughout the entire honors project process. I would also like to include a way for participants to assess the event in order to get perspectives on the topic other than my own, and to understand how the speakers felt about the discussion.

Proposed Activity

Why Study Language: Language and its Influence on Trans-Rights and Gender-Based
Discrimination

The proposed activity is an applied research project, with the culminating piece being a panel discussion that will focus on the ways in which language use and structure contribute to attitudes and perceptions of gender within our society, and the politics that surround concepts of gender. In this panel, I would like to include members of the BGSU community who can speak towards the topics of language, gender studies, discrimination, sexuality, transgender

communities, and policy. The primary objective of this panel is to explore the initial research questions and generate a productive conversation to bring new insight to the study of language and its importance in societal issues such as transgender rights. I anticipate that the topics covered on the day of the actual panel will differ slightly from those I have researched due to the diverse perspectives brought in by the panel speakers and the organic evolution of the discussion.

The panel discussion will take place in either March or April, depending on the availability of spaces on campus and of potential speakers. I am planning for the discussion to last about 2 hours, and I will make it open to the public, and especially encourage honors students and faculty alike to attend. To prepare for the panel discussion, I will choose a few readings from my research that I feel best present the arguments and concepts that are fundamental to this discussion and send said articles to the potential speakers with a list of prompting questions. This will ensure that speakers understand the background information necessary to have the conversation and prepare their talking points and positions to ensure that the panel discussion is as focused as possible. I also intend to provide informational packets or resources for professors and students who express interest in attending the panel in order for those participants to be familiar with the topic as well.

This project's intention is to shed light on a real-world community issue that more than likely affects many students at Bowling Green, to both provide a fundamental look at the issue of transgender rights while also critically examining the ways in which concepts of gender are a hegemonic system that our language structure continues to uphold. I believe that the study of language is crucial to understanding the world around us and the societies we live in, and to bring this insight to the BGSU community and provide them with the opportunity to think more

critically about their own language use could lead to a more inclusive and globally aware campus atmosphere.

Expected Results

The reason that I find this subject to be so important, especially for honors students, is that language is so embedded into every part of our lives and yet often forgotten in the study of cultural perspectives. As an honors student at Bowling Green, I have been taught to use my critical thinking skills to make more intelligent observations about the world around me and use those observations to help create positive change. I believe that this issue falls directly within those teachings.

My ideal result of this discussion would be a shift in thinking among the participants and attendees of this panel discussion in regard to their language use. I feel that after the discussion is over, those who were in attendance should be able to think more critically about the ways that language affects their personal relationships, beliefs, and reactions in their daily life. I hope that this can help to create an open dialogue in the University community on the topic of gender-based discrimination and the role that language plays. In terms of longevity, I think the results will be much more intrinsic than those of other honors projects, but I think it is important that we nurture a community of students who take care to think of the impact of their words. I feel that this event would be important not only to honors students, but also to every student who has a desire to be inclusive and to communicate without microaggression or offense. I hope to encourage an open dialogue on our campus, and to raise awareness of sociolinguistic issues of power.

Resources

Abbou, J., & Baider, F. (2016). *Gender, language and the periphery: Grammatical and social gender from the margins*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Cox, P. & Porzucki, N. (2018, March 19). *The World in Words: The British Mx Tape*.

(Audio Podcast). Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/podcasts/381444240/pri-s-the-world-the-world-in-words>

Deutscher, G. (2011). *Through the language glass: Why the world looks different in other languages*.

Arrow Books.

Joseph, J. E. (2006). *Language and politics*. Edinburgh University Press.

Public Radio International (2018, August 29). *When Reporting Sexual Assault, Rohingya Women*

Are Being Lost in Translation. Retrieved from

www.pri.org/stories/2018-08-29/when-reporting-sexual-assault-rohingya-women-are-being-lost-translation.

Spender, D. (1998). *Man-made language*. Pandora.

Annotated Bibliography

Abbou, J., & Baider, F. (2016). *Gender, language and the periphery: Grammatical and social gender from the margins*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.

This book describes the way in which gender-based linguistic discrimination occurs and explains the gendering of language based on both linguistic structures and cultural connotations. Abbou and Baider achieve this goal by using case studies of various languages and their gender markers,

as well as descriptions of the linguistic structures and concepts from which these markers originate. Abbou and Baider make a strong argument for the linguistic contributions to gender discrimination that are discreetly but heavily embedded in our everyday language use.

The research presented in Abbou & Baider's book stood out to me because what originally drew me to the topic I've chosen is the inherent gendering of language and the thought that it could possibly influence our attitudes towards gender identity and expression. I felt that their research effectively tied together the objective, linguistic definitions and concepts while still maintaining a feminist cultural approach, and gave me a factual foundation from which to continue my research.

Bassetti, B. A. L. (2014). Is grammatical gender considered arbitrary or semantically motivated? Evidence from young adult monolinguals, second language learners, and early bilinguals. *British Journal of Psychology*, 105(2), 273–294.
<https://doi-org.ezproxy.bgsu.edu/10.1111/bjop.12037>

This study aims to analyze the motivation of grammatical gender and whether or not it can be considered arbitrary. Using three groups of speakers (young adult monolinguals, second language learners, and early bilinguals) the researchers presented gendered noun entities and asked participants questions about their impressions of the gendering of nouns. Overall, the study found that participants believed grammatical gender to be semantically motivated and related to perceived masculine or feminine connotations of the noun in question, implying that grammar

itself may uphold certain concepts of gender roles and perception of the masculine and the feminine.

This study is useful to my research in that it provides evidence of the motivations behind the gendering of language, supporting my hypothesis that language is not arbitrary and is intertwined with larger societal concepts of gender. I intend to reference this study in my discussion of how language and gender relate to and impact one another, as it provides a factual basis of understanding and tangible numbers for those who are less inclined to believe that a relationship exists between the two phenomena.

Cox, P. & Porzucki, N. (2018, March 19). *The World in Words: The British Mx Tape*.

(Audio Podcast). Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/podcasts/381444240/pri-s-the-world-the-world-in-words>

The World in Words is a podcast sponsored by PRI (Public Radio International) that focuses on topics and storylines concerning language and the way it affects the world and its citizens. This specific episode of the podcast discusses titles and honorifics and their place in British society. Aside from the traditional royal titles and honorifics that suggest marital status, the episode also analyzes the rise of a gender-neutral honorific, “Mx.,” which reveals neither gender nor marital status of an individual.

I think it would be short-sighted to discuss language in relation to power dynamics without including the way that gender identity can determine the amount of power you retain in your

social circles. This podcast helps to enlighten how language can contribute to gender dynamics and power structures in modern culture. With the way that societies are exploring and redefining gender it is important that our language evolves to reflect that cultural change, and the ways that society reacts to this onset of “inclusive language” can help to shed light on how our culture is reacting to these changes.

Crovitz, D., & Devereaux, M. D. (2017). *Grammar to get things done: A practical guide for teachers anchored in real-world usage*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Regarding Crovitz & Devereaux’s book, I would like to specifically focus on the second chapter, titled “Grammar and Power,” in which the authors explore the nuances of grammar usage and how it can contribute to judgements on the social status of people. The chapter outlines the ways in which grammar can help contribute to cultural power structures, citing “grammar police” and “standard English fallacies” as major causes for the silencing of dialogue between people who differ either culturally or in terms of power within the situation.

This reading is useful in my studies in that it takes a tangible concept of language (grammar) and associates it to larger societal functions: economic gain, expression of self and ideas, and the use of language as a cultural tool in the creation of literature. I think that Crovitz & Devereaux’s concept of grammar could be useful in analyzing how the use of language can contribute to societal inequalities. For example, certain dialects of English have more or less societal respect for grammar mistakes on resumes, with these mistakes affecting their job prospects despite qualifications and experience.

Deutscher, G. (2011). *Through the language glass: Why the world looks different in other languages*. Arrow Books.

This is a non-fiction book by linguist Guy Deutscher that analyzes the ways that our mother tongue could potentially affect how we perceive the world around us. By first describing how languages have historically been studied and even hierarchically organized, Deutscher gives the readers a basic foundation of the field of linguistics before delving into his own theories on language. This look into the evolution of language study allows for a lot of reflection on how language functions as both a universal phenomenon and a daily tool for communication.

This book will serve as a starting point of my studies for my honors project research, as it poses the question “does the language we speak affect the way we think?,” which I think is an important research question in my attempt to understand how language might affect the power dynamics created in various cultures. In understanding how language might shape our thoughts, I might be able to understand how the ways that we use and perceive language can shape our perceptions of other people and their status in our culture.

D.I.C.E Summit (2018, October 01). *Speakers vs. Workshops vs. Roundtables*. Retrieved from https://www.dicesummit.org/about/speakers_workshops_roundtables.asp

This webpage describes different formats for holding professional and intellectual discussions. The options range from a description of main stage speakers to a summary of how roundtables

work. While the D.I.C.E Summit is not related to the topical focus of my project, I did use their website as resource during the planning of my honors project. The different format descriptions aided me in deciding how to structure the event I hope to hold in the spring.

Horvath, L. K., Merkel, E. F., Maass, A., & Sczesny, S. (2015). *Does Gender-Fair Language Pay Off?*

*The Social Perception of Professions from a Cross-Linguistic Perspective. **Frontiers in Psychology, 6, 2018. <http://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.02018>***

This is a cross-linguistic study that compares the effectiveness of gender-fair language in German and Italian in terms of increased inclusion of women. This study was done with the intention to create gender-fair language policies to mitigate gender-based discrimination in the professional and political world. This study looks specifically at the use of feminine-masculine word pairs as a method of gender-fair communication. Their findings indicate that this use of feminine-masculine word pairings in German and Italian help to include women while avoiding a “lesser-status” power dynamic between the masculine and feminine.

I chose to include this study because of its cross-linguistic nature and because it explores the idea of “gender-fair” language. This is not the same as gender-neutral inclusive language, where there is a third option for those who exist outside of the gender binary, but rather a system where both the feminine and masculine form of words are included in order to reduce the connotational gender of a concept, specifically in professions. This is important to include because many would find that this is a step in the right direction, but it still lacks a means for transgender and non-

binary individuals to self-identify. I think this study supports my hypothesis that speakers of gendered languages have a harder time accepting those outside of the binary, because even their attempts to make gendered language more inclusive still rely on a binary.

Joseph, J. E. (2006). *Language and politics*. Edinburgh University Press.

This author makes the argument that language itself is inherently political and that every utterance or text we come into contact with is political, meaning it has the ability to change society, due to its ability to shape attitudes and contribute to certain societal power dynamics. In Joseph's work, language is portrayed as a tool for societal change and as a basic foundation of political ideologies and opinions. Joseph also describes the institutional power that language holds, describing the politics involved in determining the linguistic "correctness" of language use and the nuances behind language correction, and the institutions of power and the choices that they make involving language.

I plan to use *Language and Politics* to present the argument that language is a fundamental tool for any mass societal change in attitudes or cultural perspectives. This book's approach to explaining linguistic correction and the institutionalized control of language combined with the arguments presented in Crovitz & Devereaux's chapter titled "Grammar and Power" will serve as a basis of my explanation of the ways that language and power dynamics interact.

Orelus, P. W. (2012, 01). Facing with Courage Racial and Linguistic Discrimination: The Narrative of an ELL Caribbean Immigrant Living in the U.S. Diaspora. *Diaspora*,

Indigenous, and Minority Education,6(1), 19-33. doi:10.1080/15595692.2011.633130

This narrative describes the challenges faced by a Haitian immigrant in the United States who takes on English as a second language and his struggle in facing both racial and linguistic discrimination. Being a black immigrant who speaks English non-natively, Orelus underwent a grueling journey that brings many socioeconomic, racial, and language-related prejudices seen in the United States to light. Using personal experiences, Orelus's work situated language-based discrimination in a racially driven context.

While I intend to focus mainly on linguistic discrimination and how it relates to gender identity, it would be remiss not to include the experiences of immigrants and people of color in my research, as they have often been subjected to linguistic discrimination and are constantly subordinated by U.S. federal policies and societal institutions. I wanted to ensure that my research did not limit itself to the experiences of women (specifically cisgender heterosexual women) and the gender-based discrimination that we face, but that it also included those who have been further marginalized and dehumanized by day-to-day speech.

Public Radio International (2018, August 29). *When Reporting Sexual Assault, Rohingya*

***Women Are Being Lost in Translation*. Retrieved from**

www.pri.org/stories/2018-08-29/when-reporting-sexual-assault-rohingya-women-are-being-lost-translation.

I was led to this article by the podcast from *The World in Words*, as they are both produced by Public Radio International. This article describes how linguists, humanitarians, and translators have collaborated in order to aid women from Rohingya in reporting the violations that have been committed against them. I felt that this was an important article to include in the annotated bibliography because it displays the ways in which linguistic research can help to empower minority communities and victims of oppression.

This article could potentially be more useful during the execution of my honors project than the development portion, as I feel it could be a supplemental reading used in a facilitated discussion on the broader topic during the lecture series. Not only is it a relevant current event, but it is also a testament to how language can play a pivotal role in empowering people.

Rajagopalan, K. (2001). *The Politics of Language and the Concept of Linguistic Identity.*

CAUCE, Revista de Filología y su Didáctica. 24, 17-28.

This article describes the political, and often discriminatory, nature of linguistic identification. Linguistic or language identification is the process of recognizing oneself within a specific speech community and being able to express yourself and communicate within that group. Rajagopalan considers the idea of “common languages” between speakers and makes the argument that the entire concept of a “common language” or “global language” is in and of itself political, because there is nothing inherently natural about language at its core, it is an abstract, socially constructed phenomenon. In trying to create common languages or in creating different

languages humans are not demonstrating where they are unable to communicate with each other, but rather where they are unwilling to communicate with each other.

This is an interesting concept and could greatly contribute to the argument that gendered language is not inherently natural, and that therefore a gender binary in terms of identity is not inherently natural either. Abstract concepts such as identity and language cannot accurately be bound to the “laws of nature” and to limit expression of self through a forced binary in language both minimizes non-binary conforming individuals and makes it difficult for native speakers to fully comprehend the nuances and complexity of identity.

Sendén, M. G., Bäck, E. A., & Lindqvist, A. (2015). *Introducing a gender-neutral pronoun in A natural gender language: The influence of time on attitudes and behavior. Frontiers in Psychology, 6*. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4486751/>.

In this study, Sendén, Bäck & Lindqvist analyze the psychological effect that a gender-neutral or “gender-fair” pronoun has on Swedish language speakers. With the introduction of the pronoun “*hen*,” the researchers aimed to study the general public’s feelings toward the pronoun as both a generic neuter grammar structure and a means of self-identification for transgender and non-binary individuals. It was found that time was the most essential variable in this study, and that the longer the population had to acclimate to the use of the new pronoun, the more their attitudes shifted in a positive direction. The study’s major finding was that new gender-neutral and non-binary identifiers in a typically gendered language will cause strong negative reactions quickly,

but that with time these attitudes will shift, and the pronoun will become accepted within the culture.

This study is really important to my research because it showcases the ability to create mass attitude shifts if society is given time to acclimate. The conversation should not be centered on whether we *should* change our language use to help people self-identify accurately and safely, but rather *when* will we change our language use. Change will always make waves, but society will eventually regain their balance and it will be a brighter and safer future for those who do not identify within the binary.

Spender, D. (1998). *Man-made language*. Pandora.

This is a book written by a feminist analyst who argues that all language is gendered and gives power to gender roles and societal structures by perpetuating a male-centered narrative. The book is partitioned into different sections that describe the ways in which the English language is either favorable to the male experience or discriminatory to the female experience.

Spender's book will be useful to me in my research in that it gives a biased perspective of the topic with clearly defined opinions that I can use to either defend or analyze the intersection of language use and gender roles. Given that this book is heavily biased and older than the rest of my sources, I will likely need to find a more contemporary and neutral companion, but it can definitely present an origin to feminist ideals within this field.

Swoyer, C. (2003). *Relativism*. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/relativism/supplement2.html>

This is a resource from Stanford University that explains the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis, also known as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, which argues that one's thinking and worldview is relative to, or framed by, the language they speak. This hypothesis is central to the arguments presented in Guy Deutscher's "Through the Looking Glass" and my honors project is largely based in its theories. Sapir & Whorf's theory of linguistic relativity has both philosophical and sociolinguistic implications and will be a driving ideology in the execution of my honors project. Linguistic Determinism is also featured in this hypothesis, which is the idea that one's language not only influences a speaker's thinking but can actually dictate our thoughts and attitudes.

TIMELINE:

HNRS 4980 (FALL 2018)

September-October

- Finalize event formatting
- Begin sending out emails about participation
- Research and compile annotated bibliography
- Begin proposal

November

- Finish Proposal

- Contact interested participants
- Finalize annotated bibliography

December

- Revise and finalize proposal
- Schedule a date and reserve an event space
- Turn in HNRS 4980 materials
- Fill out HNRS 4990 Forms

HNRS 4990 (SPRING 2019)

January

- Continue researching and compose a research analysis to ground panel discussion
- Begin creating marketing materials for the event
- Reach out to courses that might be working on related topics
- Schedule regular meetings with both project advisors
- Look for opportunities to present in conferences?

February

- Send out full event details to all participants and advisors, including reading materials
- Continue working on marketing materials and thinking of ways to grow an audience
- Formulate facilitating materials (resource guides, question prompts for the panel, etc.)

March

- Advertise the event on Honors College social media and personal
- Submit event advertisement to Campus Update
- Possible presentations at CURS symposium?

- Prepare personal presentation materials (Introductory speech and ppt of personal research)

April

- Panel being held Thursday, April 11th at 7 p.m. in the Honors Den (Founders Hall)
- Reflection pieces and participant feedback
- Prepare defense presentation

May- Defense



WHY STUDY LANGUAGE?

**LANGUAGE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON
GENDER-BASED DISCRIMINATION**

A FREE PANEL DISCUSSION FEATURING BGSU
STUDENTS AND FACULTY MEMBERS.

**THURSDAY, APRIL 11 | 7 P.M. | HONORS DEN | FOUNDERS HALL
OPEN TO THE PUBLIC | QUESTIONS? EISENKD@BGSU.EDU**

Post-Project Reflection

Language is an essential part of the human experience. Everything we say, think, feel, and understand, is language. Communication drives our society, through concepts like interpersonal relationships, storytelling and the transmission of culture. To say that the study of languages is not valuable is an extremely dangerous and ignorant position to take. When I studied abroad, I had the opportunity to deeply engrain myself in a linguistically rich environment. I was in Tours, France, living and studying in an immersive French program while also learning German and studying linguistics. During this time, I began to think about how languages help to shape the cultures they belong to and how dialects are often reflective of a group outside of the status quo, which led me to a book by Guy Deutscher called "Through the Language Glass" that largely shaped my project. In his book, Deutscher presents the argument that one's native language actually influences the way they think and that by learning new languages we learn to think in new ways. This led to my interest in the topic of gender, as it is very present in American culture and politics right now, and I began to wonder if growing up in a gendered language made you less likely to accept those outside of the gender binary. I wanted to engage in a dialogue with others, to see what they thought and to show others the importance of language study, and so I decided a panel discussion would be best.

In my honors project, I aimed to create a dialogue that could highlight the importance of thinking critically about language, and by using the topic of inclusive language and gender-discrimination in daily language use I feel that I was able to show a practical example of the importance of intentionality in language. My honors project aimed to highlight the importance of

studying language by exploring this link between the linguistic structure of languages and the societal attitudes that they can contribute to.

Having never planned a panel discussion before, there were naturally many challenges and roadblocks that I faced. One major challenge in planning this discussion was finding a way to make this event accessible, not only to honors college students, but to those who might be interested in the topic and weren't necessarily in social and academic circles where they'd hear about the opportunity. I knew that marketing and careful wording in my marketing materials would be of the utmost importance, to ensure that anyone that interacted with my marketing materials felt that the event was a space where they would be welcome to participate.

Another challenge was the crafting of the panel itself, choosing panelists that would be engaging but also who would provide meaningful feedback on the questions I asked was very important to me. I reached out to more than a dozen students, faculty, and staff members, trying to ensure that I had a diverse panel. I wanted to include the voices of those affected by this issue of gender discrimination and language use, but also to those who would have some knowledge on the various nuances of language. One of my panelists, Dr. Lara Martin Lengel, was actually my professor this semester for a Gender and Communications course. I had not originally intended to ask her to participate in the panel, but after the first two weeks or so of her course I felt that her area of research was closely aligned with the topic. I found another panelist while serving on a panel myself, I was on a panel discussing the Honors Project for Amanda Rzicznek's Great Ideas course and another student on the panel, Melody Freeland, approached me afterwards to ask if she could be involved in any way. She studies Spanish and has presented similar research at BGSU's Latinx Issues Conference and was eager to continue developing upon her research. My final panelist was Dr. Katie Stygles, Assistant Director of Diversity and Equity

and the head of the LGBTQ+ resource center on campus. I knew that Dr. Stygles would be able to provide insight on the action steps that everyone attending the panel could take to be more intentional and inclusive in their language use on a daily basis.

While I am grateful for the panelists I ultimately had at the discussion, I had hoped to have more diversity in the room. All three of the panelists, including myself, were cisgender white women, which is a group that holds a lot of privilege. I was pleasantly surprised though, because my panelists all had very different ways of interpreting my questions and of interpreting this issue of gendered language, which provided a lot of productive debate and conversation. If given more time to recreate this panel though, I would've liked to have a transgender or non-binary individual on the panel who could speak from their lived experiences. I felt a bit of discomfort reaching out to transgender and non-binary individuals in the BGSU community though, as I feared it would seem that I was tokenizing that population. If I had the chance to go back in time, I likely would've had a third advisor on this project, someone like Dr. Stygles, who could've helped me reach out to other communities in question in a manner that didn't feel inappropriate.

My expectations for the panel were, in all honesty, extremely low. I understand that panel discussions are a tough event to market in the first place, but I also feared that my topic was too niche to appeal to an audience outside of my advisors. Despite my worries, I had a turnout of about 15-20 people in the audience, and the audience was engaged. I had not expected to fill even five seats and I assumed the audience would be mostly my friends who were there in silent support, however what I actually ended up with was a room full of mostly faculty and some students that I did not know, who asked questions and engaged with the speakers. The lack of

diversity in my panel was partly remedied by the personal experiences and opinions of the audience. Their contribution was totally unexpected, but invaluable.

The discussion started with the question, “What does gendered language mean to you, and where do you see its relevance in your life?” From this question the panel took multiple directions, discussing inclusive language, gendered nouns across various languages, and best practices for introducing yourself and your personal pronouns to others. I had not expected there to be much debate or audience engagement, but my expectations were quickly proven wrong, as both my panelists and the audience asked their own questions. My original intention in organizing a panel discussion was to create a dialogue on our campus that would invite BGSU community members to think more critically about their language use, and this intention was brought to fruition. One audience asked about how to appropriately ask for pronouns and how to navigate normalizing pronouns as a cisgender male. A few audience members shared their experiences as nonbinary or transgender individuals with language use and the need for inclusive language not only in higher education but also in the larger community. The room also discussed the ways that inclusivity can be introduced in higher education environments, and the ways that faculty and staff might possibly be supported and educated on the topic in order to promote this initiative.

I could not have hoped to have a more meaningful conversation at the panel discussion, and I feel that my project was completed in a successful manner because ultimately, I wanted to create a space for BGSU students to reflect on the importance of language. If given the opportunity to expand upon or redo this project, I would hold this panel discussion in a larger space or via a social media platform to make it more accessible to all of the Bowling Green community. I would have also loved to work in partnership with the Office of Multicultural

Affairs and the World Languages Department to organize a workshop specific to thinking critically about the importance of language, both as a vehicle of global communication but also as a means of interpersonal and cultural sensitivity. This is an idea that I would like to revisit in my graduate studies, or in my personal life after graduation.

In the final phases of this project I think that it was necessary to include my proposal and annotated bibliography, as well as a reflection on the project and the poster I created, in order to present the entirety of what this project has meant to me in my final semester at Bowling Green. This project permitted me to take my interest in language and dig deeper, searching for a way to take this interest and find a way to merge it with a burgeoning interest in social justice and recognizing my own privilege and using that privilege to help others. I am grateful for the honors project experience and I know that the work that I've done over the past two semesters on this project is work that will carry on in every aspect of my life, well beyond my career at BGSU, and that will allow me to continue to think critically about the world and my contributions to society. I hope that in the future, BGSU students are challenged and fascinated by the intricacies of language, and that my passion for language has inspired some of them to continue the conversation.

