

Chapter V

Language as Social Institution: The Male-Centered IT Culture

OBJECTIVES

This chapter aims to help you understand the following:

- Why paying attention to “political correctness” matters in our dominator social system.
- Ways in which both language and communication style are gendered and maleness is privileged over femaleness.
- How the communication style that predominates in IT contributes to an IT culture that may not be hospitable to many women.
- How the predominance of violence in language, metaphors, and video games contributes to an unfriendly climate for women in IT.
- How the IT culture is not immune from the sexual objectification of women that predominates in the larger society and the toll that can take on women in IT.

INTRODUCTION

Language as a social institution is the primary symbol system through which we teach/learn about our dominator culture. The assumptions, values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that are considered “normative” are deeply embedded in

our language and communication style. The “language of domination” features “shoulds and musts, blame and criticism, [and] judgment and demand,” all of which privileges certain groups and suppresses others according to their “appropriate” social rank (Hart, 2004, p. 114). Language is also one of the powerful mechanisms for teaching and conveying stereotypes; the significant impact of which we have already explored.

Further, without a great deal of mindful effort, the average person conforms to stereotypes of language and communication style without even being aware of it. Johnson (2006) describes how most of us learn to take the “path of least resistance” with regard to social expectations of ourselves and of others. This also points to the necessity for what feminist activists and scholars have called “consciousness raising.” Once we become conscious of the ways in which our language and communication style reflect dominator stereotypes that have taught us false models for how to think about ourselves and each other, we can make conscious choices to do things differently. This chapter explores the following concepts in an effort to chart the map down the “path of resistance” to a dominator social system: (1) why political correctness matters; (2) gendered communication style; (3) male-centered IT communication style and culture; and (4) dominance, violence, and sex metaphors in IT.

WHY POLITICAL CORRECTNESS MATTERS

One common and clear example of how values, attitudes, and beliefs are taught via language is the notion of “political correctness.” In the 60s and 70s in the U.S., a variety of previously marginalized groups gained a louder social voice, and one of the social institutions that they began to challenge was language. In a dominator social system, those in power hold the power to name; the words of one group are privileged, while the words of the subordinate group are “lacking in authority, forcefulness, effectiveness, persuasiveness” (Spender, 1980, p. 10). Therefore, for subordinate groups, investing the dominator language with their own different and positive meanings is a priority (p. 6). However, when previously subordinate groups reclaim the power to name, they also explicitly disrupt the system of rankings that is a primary element of dominator societies. So, groups who are privileged by the system of dominance will naturally resist since they perceive these changes as representing a loss of power. With regard to language, the result has been the invention of a concept now referred to as “political correctness.”

The claim from those with social privilege and social authority is that they should not have their beliefs, attitudes, and words defined by others; they often invoke “libertarian principles of freedom of expression” (Herring, 1999, p. 151).

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