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### Language and Division in Society

Language<sup>1</sup> is a crucial aspect of the society we live in. People use language as a means to communicate both their thoughts and ideas. This has enabled cooperation and collaboration between people for a millennium, leading to some of the greatest accomplishments in history. Linguistic skills are required for almost every task we perform; it is so prevalent in our society that you might not have noticed that you are using your linguistic skills right now to read this essay. Language can also be used to harm. Even with its role as a facilitator in the communication of knowledge and ideas, language inadvertently divides people across cultural, economic, and various other lines. This creates larger issues that transcend simple differences in language and involve larger societal problems, such as discrimination, racism, and prejudice.

Language allows for collaboration, which allows monumental tasks to be accomplished. This is because language can bring people together to work on a single task. For example, if an architect cannot effectively communicate what they want the building to look like to the construction worker it will be very difficult for the building to be built to the correct specifications. Language allows us to not only persuade people to work together and to work together on one task. If we did not have language, it would be much harder to accomplish these tasks. The use of language for collaboration is one of the less noticeable uses of language because we only notice it when we fail. If you were able to persuade someone to work with you,

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<sup>1</sup> Language will include both spoken language and written language in this paper.

you will simply work with them; only when you are unable to persuade them do you realize that perhaps you could have said something else to help persuade them- basically that you could have better employed your linguistic skills.

Language also serves as a form of entertainment. While this paper may not be your idea of an entertaining read, or anyone's for that matter, other forms of literature: novels, stories, and poems are entertaining. They help emotionally stimulate us and evoke feelings, memories or allow us to tap into a reality that does not exist. One form of entertainment that you might not view as language is music; sure, the rhythm is not an aspect of language, but the lyrics are there to evoke a response out of you (either emotionally or mentally). Entertaining forms of literature have also been used to help benefit society through teaching. For example, parables in olden times were passed down, either orally or later on in writing, to help educate the generations about how to improve their chances for survival. The book that you are reading is probably not written to teach you how to survive, but it is still teaching you something about the world around you.

Language can also help you process the world around you. Either through your own interpretation or through someone else's, language can help give you a perspective on your situation. A great man once told me that writing is thinking, this is true. As one writes out their thoughts, it is far easier to understand the situation you are in, your perspective, and most important of all what you do not yet know. Sometimes a perspective can be forced upon you and you can be manipulated by it, shifting your views to align with the piece you are reading; this is a bad thing, but more on that later. This processing can help people determine the next step they want to take.

Language can light the fire of rebellion amongst a people. For example, in 1978 in the small village of Xiaogang in China a small group of farmers signed a secret contract, which

would go on to change the Chinese economy forever. At the time, China was under strict communist rule. The farmers, who worked on a large collective farm, noticed that people did not have any incentive to work hard. All of the farmers in Xiaogang went to work at the start of the workday and *worked* until the end of the workday. The problem was that people got the same amount of food no matter how much they worked or harvested. One day the group of farmers came together and signed a contract; a contract in which they agreed to compete with one another. These farmers were now producing for themselves and they knew that what they produced they would be able to keep. After the signing of the contract, the farmers would work from the break of dawn until it was too dark to see and come harvest time they produced more food than they had ever before. This contract was risky because it was opposing the government (one that did not view opposition positively); fortunately for these farmers at this time the regional leader of the communist party was supportive of their economic experiment and began running this experiment of competition on other farms. In short, competition became a large and integral part of the Chinese economy. That economy has built China into one of the major economic players in the modern world. This was all made possible by a small contract that brought people together to compete.

The same idea was used years earlier in 1776 when the founding fathers came together and wrote the Declaration of Independence. This document would go on to change America forever and create the nation that we live in today. Language was used to spread the idea of rebellion and forming a new nation, as well as gain support for the cause. Only with the aid of persuasive language were the colonies able to secede from the British Empire. A few years later, the Constitution of the United States was written it is another piece of language that affects us on

a daily basis: it establishes the government that rules over us and the Bill of Rights provides and guarantees our rights.

While language is a great aspect of our society, it can also cause divisions to form in our society. One of the tamest examples of this is the division between speakers of British English and American English. These two languages have different sounds for words and even sometimes different spellings of words. This division is one that is obvious, but typically does not create any true divisions in society. Some British may merely look down on Americans wondering why Americans have gone and messed up the Queen's English. This difference is simply a way of identifying different people.

The people in this country do the same thing. We can identify people from the south by their accent and with that accent comes the stereotypes that we have about people in the south. The accent of the people from different regions of the United States is often accompanied by a stereotype or assumption made about the person with the accent. This serves to divide us as a people.

People in the United States have been used to living with people from all over the world since the founding of the nation. They have also found things they had in common with other people, as well as what they did not have in common. In the not so distant past, there was a discrimination between the old money and the *nouveau riche*. This is shown in the *Great Gatsby*, written by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Gatsby is constantly attempting to make himself appear to be from old money, saying things like "old sport" and adamantly defending that he went to Oxford, making him upper class.

The discrimination based on class has been around forever. The upper class and aristocratic class have looked down upon the lower or peasant class and how they talk. These

class divides have been widened by the difference in language, which can be used as a quick identifier of class. Even today, there is still discrimination in that people look down on swearing and crude language, which is typically associated with the lower class. I personally disagree with this and believe that swearing simply adds passion and exclamation to a situation. These divides run deep in our society and drive people apart. This hinders cooperation and prevents some of the amazing things that could happen because of the cooperation from happening. This hurts the society both socially and economically.

This same idea of identifying different people is present in Germany. Germany is a relatively new country and used to be a group of many individual regions. This difference is still evident to the German people. A person who has grown up in an area can identify someone from the next village over by the way they talk and the words they use alone. My grandmother grew up in Germany and now enjoys pointing out how some of the words she uses are “regional” and how no one from anywhere outside of the village would use them. This uniqueness serves to divide the German people, but they do not discriminate between villages they simply recognize the difference.

For an example of discrimination based on language, you have to look at Haiti. In Haiti, the people speak Creole, specifically French Creole. Creole is, according to the Collins English Dictionary, a language that is created from a mixture of different languages and has become the main language in a particular place. Unfortunately for the already poor people of Haiti in order to get high-class jobs, jobs that will help them better their standard of living, they have to learn French. This creates a “Linguistic Apartheid” in Haiti, which reinforces the us versus them mentality. This has been present in Haiti since the colonial era. For the people of Haiti if they want to improve their standard of living they have to learn French, but there are not very many

good schools in Haiti; this makes the already difficult process of learning a new language even more difficult. This discrimination is not only present in Haiti, people are made fun of and discriminated against because of the language they use all over the world.

People can also weaponize language and use it to drive people apart. This can be seen with racial slurs that are used to hurt people of a certain race and separate them from the population as something different. This is simply not true, we are all human beings and even though we may be different in some ways that are the part of us that is unique and interesting. This weaponized language is only there to cause division in a society, separating people. A recent example of this would be the 2016 elections, during which it is alleged that Russians used social media to sow discord and division amongst the people of the United States making it a very polarized election. Language can be used to help a society, but it can also be weaponized and used to manipulate a society. This is something that is more of a problem now because of the modern connected world we live in.

Language is more powerful now than ever before, because of how many people it can reach. A single tweet, text or email can be viewed instantly by any number of people. Language can spread faster now than ever before. This can be helpful language in the form of a reputable news article posted online for all to see – helping the population become educated and given a perspective on the situation that they may not be aware of – or an example of hate speech – weaponized to divide people and hurt people. The language we use is much more powerful than we know and the repercussions are widespread. The question that every person that uses language has to answer for themselves is what will they do with the power language gives to them, will they help society rise or will they attempt to divide it?