

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN CHALLENGING GENDER NORMS

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Abstract

Language holds a fundamental role in shaping and contesting social perceptions of gender. This paper undertakes an exploration into how language functions, as both a reflector and a perpetuator of gender stereotypes, scrutinizing manifestations such as gendered language and, linguistic innovations like gender-neutral pronouns to emphasize the significance of mindful language usage in fostering inclusive environments.

Feminist linguistics examines how language structures reflect and perpetuate gender inequality, advocating for linguistic changes that promote gender equality and challenge patriarchal norms. In adopting a feminist linguistic perspective, our research sheds light on how language crosses with numerous features of identity, thereby influencing individuals' experiences of gender. These concepts are crucial for challenging gender norms through language. Furthermore, we present a case study of Juno Dawson's *Her Majesty's Royal Coven*, which could be categorized under “Witch Lit” and/ or “Chick Lit”, both labels capturing elements of the novel's themes and style. While “Witch Lit” emphasizes the supernatural aspects, “Chick Lit” highlights the focus on character-driven narratives and relationships. The novel showcases how language in literature can challenge conventional gender roles and provoke readers to reconsider social expectations. Through these explorations, the paper underlines language's transformative potential in confronting and reshaping cultural norms surrounding gender. By dissecting language's multifaceted role, this paper advocates for more inclusive and impartial linguistic practices to foster a society that embraces diversity and respects individuals' gender identities and expressions.

Key-words: *gender-inclusive language, gender stereotypes, gender, identity, intersectionality, inclusive communication.*

Language often reflects and perpetuates gender stereotypes. For example, certain words or phrases may be gendered, implying that certain roles or characteristics are inherently associated with a particular gender. At the same time, language can be a compelling tool for challenging and subverting traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Linguistic innovation, such as the creation of gender-neutral pronouns (e.g., “they/them” as singular pronouns), can help affirm the identities of non-binary and gender non-conforming individuals. The language referring to a specific gender is also reflected by grammatical structures, for example when we use the gender-neutral language, which may have masculine connotation (e.g., “mankind” to refer to all humans, or “police officer” which does not refer to the person gender but the person that works in a police department), we risk to disempower or deprecate women, binary or non-binary persons from linguistic depiction.

Gender stereotypes specifically involve preconceived notions assigning certain characteristics and roles to women and men solely based on their gender. They typically manifest in one of two ways. Firstly, they may assume that all people fit into a specific group, and only those identified with a specific gender can have a certain type of job. Thus, most people consider that all CEOs are men, and all the secretaries are women. Secondly, they may involve assuming that all individuals of a certain gender possess specific traits or behaviours. For example, this could entail the belief that all women enjoy shopping or the notion that men should not display emotions like crying.

Conscious language use, such as using inclusive language (e.g., “chairperson” instead of “chairman”) and avoiding gendered stereotypes in speech and writing can contribute to creating more equitable and inclusive environments.

However, unconscious cultural stereotypes seep into our language, leading people to using expressions that unwittingly perpetuate these stereotypes, even if they do not consciously subscribe to them. By continuously repeating these stereotypes language, individuals inadvertently reinforce the underlying assumptions they carry. Therefore, it is essential to make a concerted effort to avoid stereotypes in the language we employ. Promoting gender-inclusive language practices in workplaces and other institutions can help foster environments that value diversity and respect individuals' gender identities and expressions.

1. Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality was introduced by the legal scholar and critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw to explain underscores the way in which social categories, like race and gender, intersect on a micro level to influence individual experiences, creating multiple layers of discrimination and privilege as these categories overlap (Crenshaw, 1991). It is essential to recognize that language intersects with other aspects of identity, such as race, class, and sexuality, shaping individuals' experiences of gender. Language can reflect and reinforce intersecting systems of oppression, but it can also be a site of resistance and empowerment for marginalized groups.

Intersectional approaches to language challenge simplistic understandings of gender and highlight the complex ways in which gender interacts with other social categories to shape individuals' life experiences. Intersectionality recognizes various factors that can confer advantages or, more commonly, disadvantages, and these factors may simultaneously empower and oppress individuals. For instance, a transgender woman who also has a disability might encounter discrimination not solely based on each protected characteristic individually, but somewhat due to the combination of several aspects.

2. Language, Gender Stereotypes and Inclusive Communication in *Her Majesty's Royal Coven* Case study

The novel *Her Majesty's Royal Coven* challenges traditional witchcraft stereotypes by presenting a diverse cast of characters with unique background and abilities. Rather than adhering to conventional portrayals of witches, the author explores the intersectionality of identity, including race, gender and sexuality. For instance, the depiction of transgender experiences within a witchcraft setting challenges stereotypes and expands representation within the genre.

The plot revolves around a quartet of childhood friends, now grown women, who have travelled their own paths encountering trials and tribulations that have led them to drift apart. But these are not just ordinary women but witches, each of them wielding unique strengths and abilities. Their reunion is prompted by the arrival of a young warlock, with untamed abilities, sparking both danger, and foreboding prophecies from the oracles. Faced with a pivotal choice, the coven must decide whether to unite or splinter.

Set in the contemporary era, the narrative is peppered with references to familiar elements like Alexa, social media, the Spice Girls and high-end fashion labels such as Prada, Chanel, Celine.

She wore a 2017 jade Celine trouser suit with zebra Jimmy Choo pumps." [...] "'Good morning, everyone', Helena said, launching into the room Devil-Wears-Prada style. (2023: 288)

The story ably tackles issues of racism, homophobia and intolerance toward diversity within the framework of the matriarchal society and *Her Majesty's Royal Coven*. Particularly noticeable is the reversal of expectations, with younger characters exhibiting bigotry while elder figure champions acceptance, challenging the stereotype of older generations resisting change.

2.1. Evocative Language

Dawson skilfully portrays vivid scenes and characters with evocative language, avoiding verbosity. While some critics have found the book a little shallow, we found it to be perfectly executed, providing sufficient background on the characters, and their past choices to immerse readers in their current lives. The rich array of distinct well-developed characters adds depth to the narrative, enriching the storyline. As a debut novel, it sets a promising precedent for further episodes, showcasing Dawson's talent for crafting engaging tales.

It is fascinating to delve deeper into the themes and character dynamics of Dawson's portrayal of transgender issues within a witchcraft backdrop. The exploration of the intrusion of a warlock who identifies as female despite being officially identified as male, is both intriguing and thought-provoking. Helena's character is particularly captivating at first, portrayed as a stalwart protector and astute leader of the coven. However, her decision to manipulate Snow into spying on Niamh quickly changed our opinion, and we found ourselves hoping for her demise. Her paranoia regarding Theo's intentions added intricate layers and tensions among the characters, resulting in numerous plot twists. Despite some frustration raised with Helena, readers have every reason to appreciate Dawson for crafting such a multifaceted character, whose actions evoke strong emotions.

While reading paragraphs as the one below, we can see how language plays a crucial role in challenging gender norms, by challenging a shift in perspective and advocating inclusivity. Niamh's use of language serves to challenge traditional gender binaries and promote acceptance of diverse gender identities within the context of a coven.

Niamh had vowed to herself that there would be no more raised voices on this. 'OK, let's try a different approach. I think Theo's inclusion in the coven could be a positive thing.' Helena went to interrupt, but Niamh ploughed on. 'No, bear with me on this. I know you were hurt when Leonie established Diaspora, so why don't we take this opportunity to signal that HMRC is a modern institution that welcomes LGBTQ witches? Get ahead of the curve, like.' Helena winced. 'We're going around in circles Niamh. You're asking me to induct a transgender into a coven of women.' At the word transgender, something flickered in the mind of the woman doing Helena's nails and Niamh realized she too was trans. (2023: 344)

Firstly, Niamh's choice of words demonstrates a conscious effort to redefine the boundaries of gender within the coven. By suggesting Theo's inclusion as a positive step forward, she manoeuvres the conversation away from a rigid understanding of gender as binary. Instead, she proposes an inclusive approach that acknowledges and celebrates the diversity of gender identities. Furthermore, Niamh's use of language to advocate for Theo's inclusion also serves to challenge existing norms within the coven. She emphasises the importance of signalling the coven's acceptance of LGBTQ individuals, thereby confronting any implicit biases or prejudices that may exist within the group. By framing Theo's inclusion as an opportunity to modernize and demonstrate acceptance, Niamh encourages her peers to reconsider their perspectives on gender and identity. Additionally, Helena's response highlights the power dynamics inherent in language and the resistance to challenging gender norms. When she expresses reluctance to induct a transgender individual into a coven of women, she reveals an adherence to traditional gender roles and an unwillingness to embrace change. However, Niamh's persistence and use of inclusive language

create a moment of realization for Helena, and the woman doing her nails, prompting them to confront their own biases and assumptions about gender.

Overall, the excerpt illustrates how language can be a tool for challenging gender norms and fostering inclusivity. Through careful choice of words and persistent advocacy, individuals like Niamh can promote acceptance and create space for diverse gender identities within traditionally gendered spaces.

Theo is a witch. She says she is a girl and I believe her.
And I do not. I'm sorry, Niamh. Call me old-fashioned, call me names. I don't care. You can stick a pointy hat on his head and give him a broom if you want, but that child will never be a witch. (2023: 345)

Dawson employs language to depict diverse identities and experiences within the coven. Through dialogue and narration, characters express their gender identities, such as Theo's assertion of being a girl. This language choice reflects the importance of self-identification and validates the experiences of transgender individuals.

Additionally, the author uses descriptive language to create vivid settings and characters, enhancing the immersive experience for readers without relying on stereotypes or clichés.

2.2. Stereotypes

Juno Dawson subverts expectations by portraying older characters as accepting of change, countering stereotypes of generational resistance.

You want a bit of squid? Leonie asked. Holding it out on her chopsticks.
Go on, Chinara replied. Leonie was mostly vegetarian, but the odd bit of seafood didn't guilt her out too much. Probably because she'd never lived by the sea (2023: 122)

The text above displays a stereotype. It suggests that those who have lived by the coast are more likely to eat seafood regularly and feel less guilt about it, while those who have not lived by the coast are less inclined to do so and may feel more guilt. This prolongs the stereotype that nutritional choices, and guilt about food selections are sturdily changed by geographical and cultural background. It overlooks the diverse reasons why individuals may choose certain diets or have varying attitudes towards food, which can be influenced by personal beliefs, health reasons, environmental concerns, or other factors unrelated to geographical location.

2.3. Inclusive Communication

Dawson promotes inclusive communication by centring marginalized voices and experiences in the narrative. Through nuanced character development and interpersonal relationships, the novel addresses issues of racism, homophobia,

and discrimination within the coven, and society at large. By depicting characters from diverse backgrounds navigating these challenges, the author fosters empathy and understanding among readers. Additionally, the novel highlights the importance of accepting difference and embracing change, promoting a message of inclusivity and unity.

Niamh told me she's transgender', Radley said and Helena shot him an acidic glare. [...]
She's a she? She intends to transition? [...] Helena was surprised. She didn't think a fifty-odd-year-old lesbian would be keen to defend a transgender. [...] 'Regardless of the child's identity, they were born male so they fulfil the prophecy. (2023: 290)

The text displays several aspects of inclusive communication, which are relevant to our research.

Firstly, preconceived notions about gender and sexuality are challenged in the dialogue between Radley and Helena. Radley's revelation about Theo being transgender prompts a surprised reaction from Helena, highlighting the unexpectedness of her response. Helena's initial scepticism, indicated by her "acidic glare", reflects common social misunderstandings, and intolerances regarding transgender individuals.

Secondly, the representation of diversity within the LGBTQ+ community, which we can observe in Helena's subconscious thoughts reveals assumptions that she holds about individuals within the LGBTQ+ community. Her surprise that a "fifty-odd-year-old lesbian" would defend a transgender person suggests a distorted view of LGBTQ+ identities and alliances. This moment might be supportive of transgender individuals.

Thirdly, using gender-neutral language is one of the author's literary techniques and it is present in most chapters. In the statement "Regardless of the child's identity, they were born male, so they fulfil the prophecy", the usage of the pronoun "they" to refer to a single person or child does not only respect non-binary or genderqueer identities but also demonstrates an understanding of the importance of inclusive language when discussing gender-related topics. This statement also highlights the intersection of gender identity and destiny within the narrative. Despite the child's gender identity, the prophecy is tied to their assigned sex at birth. This raises questions about the limitations and consequences of rigid gender roles and expectations within the story.

The following excerpt encapsulates a flash of awareness and intersectionality.

To see the white people?
Leonie laughed. 'No. Well yes. One white person in particular. The kid from the visions. (2023: 123)

The wit in Leonie's amusement suggests a cheerfulness that denies the importance of her acceptance. By admitting the only position of a white person

from her revelations, Leonie crosses the intricacies of identity within the framework of race. It is emphasised the intersectionality of race and personal relationships, challenging conventional narratives surrounding interracial interactions. Leonie's recognition of her connection to a white individual from her visions, reflects an awareness of the intricacies of identity and attraction that transcend racial boundaries. It prompts readers to consider how racial dynamics intersect with romantic or personal connections and underscores the complexity of navigating relationships within a diverse and multifaceted world.

Moreover, Leonie's response invites readers to reflect on the ways in which personal experiences and connections can transcend social norms and expectations. Her acknowledgement of the significance of a white individual amidst a predominantly non-white environment - suggests a nuanced understanding of race and identity. It challenges assumptions about homogeneity within racial or cultural groups and highlights the diversity of experiences and relationships that exist within marginalized communities.

Niamh was Leonie's first girl crush. Chinara knew that because she'd told her when she was drunk one time. [...], regardless of how many unrequited love songs Leonie had written about her in her Powerpuff Girls notebook way back when, Niamh was resolutely straight so that was that. What was even weirder was that she'd never fancied Ciara. (2023: 123)

In the passage above, the dynamics of romantic attraction and sexual orientation are explored through the relationship between Leonie and Niamh. This extract reveals a significant aspect of Leonie's identity (her romantic interest in Niamh) and Chinara's awareness of this aspect despite Leonie's apparent acceptance of Niamh's heterosexuality.

The disclosure that Niamh was Leonie's first girl crush highlights the complexities of sexual orientation, and personal desire within the context of friendship. Despite Leonie's feelings Niamh's heterosexual orientation remains a stumbling block to their romantic involvement. This realization prompts readers to consider the intersectionality of friendship and romantic attraction and the challenges of navigating unrequited feelings within these relationships.

Furthermore, the mention of Leonie's "unrequited love songs" in her Powerpuff Girls notebook adds depth to her character and underscores the depth of her feelings for Niamh. The specificity of this detail humanizes Leonie and invites readers to empathize with her experiences of longing and desire. The passage also sheds light on Chinara's perspective as a confidante and observer of Leonie's romantic struggles. Her awareness of Leonie's feelings and acceptance of Niamh's heterosexual orientation demonstrate a nuanced understanding of friendship and support within the context of LGBTQ+ relationships. Chinara's acceptance of Leonie's identity and experiences highlights the importance of allyship and solidarity within marginalized communities.

Overall, this excerpt offers a poignant exploration of romantic attraction, sexual orientation, and friendship. Through the characters of Leonie and Chinara,

the novel navigates the complexities of identity and desire, prompting readers to reflect on their own experiences of love and longing within the context of diverse relationships.

Language, stereotypes, inclusive communication, intersectionality and awareness are intricately combined together to illuminate the complexities of identity and discrimination throughout the story, as proven by the excerpt below

My name is Leonie. She/her pronouns. [...] finding witches, they've already found - and because there's an undeniable racial bias concerning our "culture", a lot of witches of colour are never spotted in childhood. [...] these white witches, these teachers at HMRC, see a little Chinese girl and just think *oh, that's what all Chinese girls can do.* [...] For whatever reason – OK, systemic racism – Black and Asian witches have always looked after our own. (2023: 131)

The statement, "My name is Leonie. She/her pronouns" exemplifies inclusive communication by affirming Leonie's gender identity. By explicitly stating her pronouns, Leonie asserts her identity and prompts recognition and respect from others. This linguistic choice promotes inclusivity and fosters a supportive environment for unorthodox gender individuals within the coven, as well as the broader community.

Furthermore, the passage delves into the intersectionality of race and identity, shedding light on the experiences of witches of colour within the witch community. The mention of a racial bias concerning their "culture" highlights the systemic discrimination faced by witches of colour, particularly in childhood. This acknowledgment of systemic racism underscores the importance of intersectional approaches to understanding and addressing discrimination, recognizing the interconnected nature of race, gender, and other social divisions.

Moreover, the excerpt challenges stereotypes and biases surrounding race, particularly the assumption that all Chinese girls possess the same abilities or traits. The portrayal of white witches and teachers at HMRC perpetuating such stereotypes reflects the prevalence of racial bias and the need for increased awareness and sensitivity to diverse identities and experiences. By highlighting these instances of stereotyping and discrimination, the novel prompts readers to interrogate their own biases and assumptions about race and ethnicity.

Additionally, the passage underscores the importance of solidarity and allyship within marginalized communities. The acknowledgment that Black and Asian witches have historically looked after their own emphasizes the need for collective action in combating systemic racism and discrimination. By recognizing the role of systemic racism in perpetuating inequalities, the novel fosters awareness and encourages readers to actively challenge oppressive systems and stand in solidarity with marginalized groups.

Another dialogue between the characters that reveals the importance of language and communication in addressing sensitive topics such as gender identity is the following:

...I really liked Theo but... but he...*she's* not a boy. Theo thinks she's trans.' (p. 205)

"Theo is transgender. 'It blurted out of her mouth.

Niamh waited for follow-up. 'I beg your pardon?'

'It's true. He ...or, as it transpires, she...told Holly so.' (2023: 207)

Everything about Theo was unstable, turbulent. Niamh had assumed the chaos was in his-her-home life (she had to get on top of that) but it seemed there was a storm inside of her too. What's more fundamental than your gender? The way people describe you, treat you, greet you, on a daily basis. (2023: 208)

When Theo's gender identity is revealed, there is a moment of confusion and clarification as characters navigate pronoun usage and understanding. This demonstrates the significance of using respectful language and engaging in open communication to validate individuals' identities and experiences.

The excerpt challenges stereotypes surrounding gender by depicting Theo's realization of their transgender identity. Though Theo's self-discovery and disclosure to others, the novel disrupts binary notions of gender and highlights the diversity of gender identities. This challenges stereotypes and promotes a more inclusive understanding of gender beyond traditional norms.

The passage also illustrates the importance of intersectionality by examining how gender intersects with other aspects of identity, such as mental health. Theo's internal turmoil and instability reflect the intersection of gender identity and mental well-being, highlighting the complexities individuals face in navigating multiple aspects of their identity simultaneously.

Furthermore, the excerpt emphasises the need for awareness and empathy in understanding gender identity. Niamh's reflection on the fundamental nature of gender prompts readers to consider the ways in which social norms and expectations shape individuals' experiences and perceptions of self. This encourages readers to challenge their own biases and assumptions about gender and foster greater awareness and acceptance of diverse gender identities.

You really do. We have a sentient in Diaspora that uses they/them pronouns. That was a trip at first, it just takes practice. (2023: 219)

Theo is male, Helena hissed, cutting her off. It's really very simple. Witches are female." (2023: 248)

The statement "You really do. We have a sentient in Diaspora that uses they/them pronouns. That was a trip at first, it just takes practice. (2023: 219) highlights the importance of inclusive communication and language in respecting individuals' gender identities. The character acknowledges the use of they/them pronouns for a sentient being in Diaspora, indicating an acceptance of non-binary identities. The phrase "it just takes practice" suggests that using gender-neutral pronouns may initially feel unfamiliar, but with effort and practice, it becomes natural. This demonstrates a willingness to adapt language to accommodate

diverse gender identities, promoting inclusivity and respect within the coven community.

By contrast, in bluntly stating “Theo is male, Helena hissed, cutting her off. It’s really very simple. Witches are female.” (p.248), Helena reiterates gender stereotypes and resistance to gender diversity. Her assertion that “Witches are female” reinforces the binary notion of gender and perpetuates the stereotype that all witches must conform to a specific gender identity. By insisting on Theo’s male identity and dismissing the possibility of gender diversity among witches, Helena demonstrates a lack of awareness and understanding of gender diversity. This narrow view of gender overlooks the existence of transgender and non-binary individuals within the witch community and reinforces harmful stereotypes.

Conclusions

Language plays a crucial role in challenging gender norms by reflecting and perpetuating social perceptions of gender, but also by serving as a tool for resistance and transformation. Through linguistic innovations such as gender-neutral pronouns and inclusive communication practices, individuals can affirm diverse gender identities and challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Moreover, intersectionality reminds us that language intersects with various aspects of identity, such as race, class, and sexuality, shaping individuals’ experiences of gender in complex ways. By promoting awareness and inclusivity in language use, we can foster environments that value diversity and respect individuals’ gender identities and expressions. By dissecting language’s multifaceted role in perpetuating or challenging gender norms, we advocate for more inclusive and impartial linguistic practices to create a society that embraces diversity and empowers individuals of all gender identities.

Through literature, as exemplified by Juno Dawson’s “*Her Majesty’s Royal Coven*”, language can challenge conventional gender roles and provoke readers to reconsider social expectations. The novel epitomizes inclusive communication by portraying characters dealing with complex issues of gender identity, challenging stereotypes, and promoting understanding and acceptance. Through subtle dialogue and characters interactions, it prompts readers to reflect on their own assumptions and biases whilst promoting empathy and respect towards diverse gender identities. The individuals portrayed by Dawson not only navigate a terrain of deep-rooted gender stereotypes, but also exert the power to challenge and reshape prevailing narratives, ultimately contributing to a more equitable and inclusive society.

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