

# THE POWER OF WORDS

## LESSON 4 RECLAIMING PEJORATIVE WORDS

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### TEACHING GOAL

Students will develop an understanding of the dynamics of social power differences as they relate to the evolution of racial, gender, and sexual orientation-based epithets (pejorative language).

Students will develop an awareness of the intersections of race, ethnicity, class, gender and sexual orientation bias.

#### LEARNING ACTIVITY SUMMARY

Students will debate the pros and cons of reclaiming pejorative words (assigning or re-establishing a positive connotation for a neutral term that currently has negative associations).

#### TERMS/CONCEPTS ADDRESSED

Pejorative (disrespectful) words relating to religion, sexual orientation, gender, age and ethnicity (or a combination of these), including: bitch, dyke, hag, nag, pagan, squaw (for more, see *Wimmin, Wimps and Wallflowers: An Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Gender and Sexual Orientation Bias in the United States* and *The Color of Words: An Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Ethnic Bias in the United States*; both available from [www.interculturalpress.com](http://www.interculturalpress.com)).

**Bitch** (*Wimmin, Wimps and Wallflowers* pp. 25-26): Generally an abusive word for a woman regarded as malicious, domineering, blunt, brassy or spiteful; or for any highly disagreeable woman or thing. A common implication is that the woman does not know how to hold her tongue (she talks in ways that do not conform to men's ideas of femininity). But the word implies more than this, defining – and degrading – women in terms of an animal metaphor, a female dog.

**Dyke/dike** (*Wimmin, Wimps and Wallflowers* pp. 78-79): Originally, any lesbian; today, in particular, a lesbian who takes an aggressive role and adopts “masculine” behavior. ... The term is usually a strong put-down when coming from nonlesbians, but since the 1970s it has often been used among lesbians as a blunt, political and conscious self-designation.

... Among heterosexuals, dyke may be applied to any lesbian, the generalization all the more a term of contempt. In fact, some men find the “dyke” label convenient for putting down women who are seen as unattractive, who do not act “feminine” or who show no interest in them.

**Hag** (*Wimmin, Wimps and Wallflowers* p. 131): Originally, since the fourteenth century, an old woman deemed ugly and sometimes vicious; since the sixteenth century, a witch.

... Hag later shifted in meaning to something less diabolical, usually any unattractive woman regarded by men as either sexually worthless or bad-tempered. ... It has also been used for women in general or for the stereotypical ugly, domineering mother-in-law.

**Nag** (*Wimmin, Wimps and Wallflowers* p. 211): Since the nineteenth century, a word meaning someone, often a woman, who is always scolding and finding fault. ... Used for a woman, the implication is that she complains endlessly, often about or at her husband for not behaving as she wishes he would. ... Also usually reserved for a woman is nag in the sense of an old horse (“old nag”).

**Nigger** (*The Color of Words*, p. 164-166): A pernicious slur that is without a doubt the most disparaging epithet used for black people. ... It is especially abusive when used by white people. ... Among African Americans, usage has taken a number of turns and has had its landmarks. ... Young black people have used the term since at least the 1990s in nonderogatory, nonracial ways, such as “man,” “person,” “man” or “woman.”

**Pagan/pagan** (*The Color of Words*, p. 176): An observer of a polytheistic religion, sometimes mistaken as someone who professes no religion. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1989), pagan comes from the Latin *paganus*, which originally meant “villager” or “rustic” but also “civilian” or “nonmilitant.” In Christian Latin, however, it meant “heathen,” that is, neither Christian nor Jewish. Christians, who saw themselves as “soldiers of Christ,” called non-Christians “pagans.” It came to signify a worshiper of false gods. It may also connote hedonism and primitiveness and can be offensive to those who practice a religion other than Christianity, Judaism or Islam. At the same time, worshipers who wish to stress the pre-Christian practices of their religion may take pride in their paganness.

#### TYPE OF LEARNING ACTIVITY

Debate • Role-playing • Drama • Assigned listening • Simulation

**MATERIALS NEEDED**

- This lesson plan
- Copies of handout
- Access to research materials: library, Internet, etc.

**TIME RANGE**

- Several hours for research and writing
- 1 class period

**GROUP SIZE**

Small to medium (4 to 20+ people)

**LEARNING ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS**

1. Research a word, either your choice or as assigned to you, from the list of pejorative words above (neutral words referring to a particular group based on gender, race, religion, etc., that currently have negative or disparaging connotations).

2. In small groups, formulate your stance, either your choice or as assigned to you, for or against reclaiming the word (assigning or re-establishing positive connotations for the word). (An example of a word that has been reclaimed by the group to which it refers: "queer," at one time used very disparagingly by heterosexuals to refer to homosexuals, is now sometimes used by homosexuals to refer to themselves with pride.)

3. Argue your position on reclaiming the word (five minutes).  
Address:

**History/etymology:**

- What is the social meaning of the word (connotation)?
- What is the factual meaning of the word (denotation)?
- What traits or aspects of the people targeted are being disparaged (gender, race, etc.)?
- Why do some people want to reclaim the word (use it in its original neutral or a new positive sense)?
- Why are some people uncomfortable with reclaiming it?

- Any costs associated with your stance on reclaiming: Financial, emotional/social, physical/material?

- Any benefits associated with your stance on reclaiming?

- The effects of reclaiming the word: Will it reduce or increase understanding/communication with other groups?

4. Listen to the opposing group's argument.

5. Make your rebuttal to the opposing group's argument (five minutes).

6. Listen to the opposing group's rebuttal.

7. Summarize your stance on the issue of reclaiming (five minutes).

8. Listen to the opposing group's summary.

9. As a group, vote on the issue of reclaiming.

**DEBRIEF**

Questions for debriefing

- What did you decide, and why?
- Who "owns" a word – the dominant group or the group to whom it applies?
- How can negative connotations be changed to positive ones?
  - Who has the power to make these changes? Why?
  - What resources are needed?
  - How long does it take?
- Did this exercise give you any new ideas? If so, what are they?
- Will you change any of your language or behaviors as a result of this exercise? If so, how? Why?

The Power of Words curriculum is based on cultural anthropologist Philip Herbst's ground-breaking dictionaries, *The Color of Words: An Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Ethnic Bias in the United States* (ISBN# 1-877864-97-8, \$29.95) and *Wimmin, Wimps and Wallflowers: An Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Gender and Sexual Orientation Bias in the United States* (ISBN# 1-877864-80-3, \$44.95). Both are available from:

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**Word:** \_\_\_\_\_

**1. History/etymology**

- What is the factual meaning of the word (denotation)?
- How was the pejorative connotation (association) acquired?
- What traits or aspects of the people targeted are being disparaged (gender, race, etc.)?
- How do these aspects interact with each other? Why?

**2. Why do some people want to reclaim the word (use it in its original neutral or a new positive sense)?**

**3. Why are some people uncomfortable with reclaiming it?**

**4. Are there any costs associated with reclaiming the word? (Financial, emotional/social, physical/material costs, for example)**

**5. Are there any benefits associated with reclaiming the word?**

**6. Will reclaiming the word reduce or increase understanding/communication with other groups?**

**7. Other considerations:**