Avoid Bias in Language Choice

Brief: Gender and cultural bias show up in our speeches when our language choices express attitudes and beliefs, often unconsciously held, that are based on preconceived ideas.

Learning Objective: Identify how gender and cultural bias can impact the content, delivery, and reception of a speech.

Key Terms:
- Bias: An inclination towards something; predisposition, partiality, prejudice, preference, predilection.
- Gender: Identification with the category of "male" and "female" not necessarily associated with physical characteristics or sexual identity.

What is Gender Bias?

At its heart, gender is learned by, defined, and taught to us by our culture, through language and communication. What is considered masculine or feminine in one culture may not hold true in another. How people express their gender often relies on the cultural constructs of the society in which they live or identify. The same is said of how people expect certain gender roles to be expressed by others.

In public speaking, gender bias shows up when our language choices express attitudes and beliefs, often unconsciously held, that are based on preconceived ideas about gender.

Avoid Language that Reflects Gender Bias

Gender-neutral language and gender-inclusive language aims to eliminate (or neutralize) reference to gender in terms that describe people. For example, the words fireman, stewardess, and chairman are gender specific; the corresponding gender-neutral terms are firefighter, flight attendant, and chairperson (or chair).

In public speaking, use gender-neutral language whenever possible. In addition to using gender-neutral terms such as firefighter, use "he or she" or "they" instead of "he" when referring to a person whose gender is unknown.

We often make assumptions about gender, even when a writer or a speaker uses gender-neutral language. Consider the following sentences:

> The doctor walked into the room.
> The nurse walked into the room.

"Doctor" and "nurse" are not gendered nouns, but many people assume that doctors are men and that nurses are women. As a result, sometimes writers and speakers modify nouns that refer to jobs or positions to denote the gender of the person holding that position. For example, someone might write or say, "The female doctor walked into the room" or "The male nurse walked into the room." Unless the gender of the nurse or doctor is important to the meaning of the sentence, it should be omitted.

What is Cultural Bias?

Cultural bias is the phenomenon of interpreting or judging by standards inherent to one's own culture. In other words, cultural bias exists when you try to navigate the experiences of others through the framework of your own cultural experience.

How Cultural Bias Impacts Your Speech

Cultural bias exists in two forms when speaking in public. There's the cultural bias you bring to the podium. The other exists in the minds of your audience, as they bring cultural biases with them to the auditorium. Both can impact your speech.

This dissonance between these biases can affect how your audience receives you as a speaker, affecting their view of your trustworthiness and reliability as a subject matter expert. From a rhetorical perspective, your cultural bias may impact the strength and comprehensiveness of your argument. If your cultural bias only allows you to view an issue in a certain cultural context, there may be parts of your argument that aren't fully developed simply because you don't have the perspective to even realize that part of your argument is incomplete.

To overcome cultural bias, take a step back from your speech. Consider the following questions as you attempt to recognize and address cultural bias in your speech:

- What cultural context do you bring to your speech?
- What cultural context does your audience bring to your speech?
- Are there language barriers that may exist?
- How might your cultural bias affect your language choices?
- Are there words that you're comfortable with that your audience might be uncomfortable with?
- How can you make effective language choices to reduce the impact of cultural bias in your speech?

From Concept to Action

Focusing on potential gender or cultural bias, conduct a review of a speech outline you're currently developing. Do any of your main or sub-points have the potential to be gender or culturally sensitive? If so, do the language choices you've made reflect gender or cultural bias? What changes will you need to make to overcome this bias? Do you need to change your approach towards your topic? Choose different examples? Shift your perspective? Deliberately change your word choice to reflect an unbiased attitude? Share your observations with someone from a different gender or culture and see if they have any insights to offer you.

OER IMAGE SOURCES:

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