

# Bridging Tasks – A Level English Language

## ***Part 1: A brief essay response to ‘Ladettes and slags, manwhores and boyfriends...’ by Beth Kemp***

1. Read the article, ‘Ladettes and slags, manwhores and boyfriends...’ by Beth Kemp, which talks about how our language may reflect or influence our society’s attitudes to gender.
2. Identify what YOU think the writer’s views about language and gender are.
3. Briefly explain whether you agree/disagree/part agree with the views expressed in the article.

## ***Part 2: Opinion Writing***

Write an article about language and gender in which you assess the ideas and issues raised in Beth Kemp’s article and argue your own views.

Remember to use the genre conventions of an opinion article, as well as any appropriate persuasive language techniques that help you make your feelings clear.

# Ladettes and slags, manwhores and boyfriends - gender, culture and language

By exploring the words used for men and women, both now and in the past, Beth Kemp shows how closely language change is intertwined with changes in society and culture.

Language is like a mirror, reflecting the trends in society - or at least so the reflectionist theory would suggest. On the other hand, it may be that the language we speak affects the way we see the world, the way we behave and therefore has an effect on society (the linguistic determinist view). Although one can argue endlessly about which end of the spectrum is 'true', we can't deny that language and society are connected, and many of our social concerns and trends have an impact on language. Gender is an area in which this is particularly evident, and the way in which our language represents gender is often explored at A Level.

## Looking backwards

In examining this area, we often start by looking backwards, expecting to find the 'worst' or most obviously biased usages in the past. We therefore talk about the asymmetry of terms like 'bachelor' and 'spinster', noting the positive connotations of 'bachelor' and the negative associations of 'spinster'. Bachelors are sexy, while spinsters are by now grotesque and unwanted practically by definition. While this starting point can be helpful for teachers in getting a post-feminist generation to accept that there is (or has at some point been) bias in the language, it's not particularly relevant to contemporary usage, as 'spinster' has become so pejorative that it's scarcely used except in fossilised legal contexts (though interestingly Ann Widdecombe seems happily to embrace the term to describe her identity as a single woman).

## Bachelors, ladettes and spinsters

To capture the energetic and sexy connotations of 'bachelor', the label 'bachelorette' was introduced. This new and exciting word is often used to qualify the noun 'party', getting away from the uncomplimentary idea of hens celebrating a new marriage. This word has not gained much currency in the UK, perhaps because it is not much of an improvement linguistically. Like other recent concepts such as 'ladette', it uses the diminutive suffix -ette to indicate the relationship between the original term and this new one. This -ette ending is known as a diminutive because it shows that the new form is somehow smaller than, or inferior to, the original. For example, the Collins dictionary gives the origin of 'cigarette' as French: 'a little cigar', a 'caravanette' is a small caravan, while 'leatherette' is fake leather. It's also worth noting that these new words derive from the male equivalent, creating a version marked for its femininity. To avoid sounding like the very definition of a nitpicking rabid feminist, I should acknowledge that creating a new word derived from the masculine form does at least ensure that people understand the meaning, and that it was of course necessary to abandon the now entirely negative 'spinster'. Before we applaud 'bachelorette' and 'ladette' too readily, though, it is worth thinking about the connotations they have. 'Bachelorette' has, thus far, not acquired negative meanings in the way 'spinster' did - probably because being an unmarried

woman is no longer itself perceived as being as negative as it was in the past. The word has also, however, failed to carry over the most positive sense of 'bachelor': no-one would talk about 'eligible bachelorettes' and the word lacks the connotations of sexiness and vitality that the masculine original retains. And as for 'ladette', it does not share the neutrality of 'lad', which can still be used to describe young males in a general way, while 'ladette' has a particular pattern of behaviour associated with it and is rarely used in a positive or neutral way.

## Slag or frigid

The categorisation of women by their sexual behaviour is another aspect often discussed in English Language lessons. Julia Stanley's research published in 1973 found over 200 words to label women relating to sex, compared to 20 for men. Contemporary results would probably not be so dramatic, although most people have no trouble accepting that female promiscuity is still over-represented linguistically. Youth dialect has the new noun 'sket', borrowed from Black British English via Multi-Ethnic Youth Dialect. This and related usages within this dialect have been seen as evidence that 'youth culture is increasingly sexually conservative' (Zoe Williams, April 14, 2006, *The Guardian*), which implies that sexism in the language and the culture of young people is becoming more pronounced. For some, the continued possibility of summing up a woman's character with a single word relating to her sexual behaviour is evidence of a new post-feminist backlash against women.

## As simple as that?

Despite the fact that words to criticise women for their sexual behaviour are still being coined and used, I would argue that these words lack the power that their equivalents would once have had. Not so very long ago, girls would never have dreamt of using 'slag' or 'slut' as jokey insults to each other as they can be heard to do now. This is evidence that those words are less taboo, and less powerful. Surely this must be connected to the fact that sexual behaviour is far less rigidly constrained than it once was? Calling someone a 'slut' was once a serious matter - this was a world in which unmarried motherhood was so taboo that women were sent to asylums and not permitted to raise their children themselves.

## Male equivalents

It is also worth noting that it is now no longer true that there is an absence of negative words for promiscuous men. The range of possibilities still includes approving terms (e.g. 'player/playa'), but new usages like 'manwhore' show a shift in attitudes and make it easier to criticise male promiscuity. On the surface, this seems to be levelling the playing field, so to speak, but there are a couple of problems here. Firstly, there is a playfulness in this usage that can only be applied to the female versions through other contextual factors (e.g. girls may understand 'whore' as jokey because of who is saying it to whom). I have never heard a male called 'manwhore' nastily. Secondly, these new negative words are marked versions of existing criticisms for female behaviour: a 'whore' is likely to be understood as female unless modified with the clarifying prefix 'man'. This need for marking words still perhaps reveals some basic assumptions about gender, in the same way that 'lady doctor' and 'male nurse' persist and indicate that doctors 'should' be male and nurses 'should' be female.

## Labelling relationships

The final contemporary gender issue to discuss here is about labelling relationships. It is perhaps odd that although marriage is no longer seen as the only grown-up relationship, we still seem to lack words to describe romantic partners. For some people 'partner' has connotations of a business relationship or a homosexual one, while for others it's a term that only works for those sharing an address. What is really interesting linguistically is that it appears to be possible to refer to a woman as a 'girlfriend' some way past the age where a man being labelled a 'boyfriend' would be acceptable. It has often been noted that adult women can be called 'girls' - it happens in the news and in sports commentaries where you would never see anyone over 18 being referred to as a 'boy'.

All this sounds rather depressing (and a little whiney), but it just shows that language change and social change are interconnected in a complex way. In many many ways, men and women are treated equally in society, but not completely and perfectly. This is not the place to debate what full equality would mean or whether such a thing is possible, but it is useful to us as students of Language to see that fixed attitudes and assumptions remain. The language we use is one way of finding evidence of these assumptions - even in those usages that seem to show progress.