
A Study Of How Powerful Words Are As Shown In The American Animated Sitcom South Park

“Contentious Language: South Park and the Transformation of Meaning”, Marcus Schulzke tries to understand the meaning of words and their ability to transform. Schulzke goes on to explain South Park generally stating, “Since its first episode, it has pushed the boundaries of free expression, questioned censorship, criticized government policies, mocked key social figures, and generally provided a well-conceived, if not always convincing, position on whatever is in the news” (Schulzke, 2012, p.23). These techniques used by the South Park staff attempts to bring attention to whatever issue they decide to present during each episode. During the episode “The F Word” the meaning of the word fag takes on a transformation of meaning. What is typically used as slander towards homosexuals’ changes meanings due to the work by the four main characters (Eric, Kyle, Stan, and Kenny) to refer to the obnoxious biker gangs. Schulzke uses a couple main points to help establish his argument; The divide among children and adults is apparent, not only in this episode, in many South Park episodes to show the division of generations and how they perceive things differently. Schulzke also attempts to try and figure out which is more important, the actual meaning of the word or the meaning the speaker intended (Schulzke, 2012).

The distinguishment between the children and adults was used to show how meanings of words can change overtime especially from generation to generation. The adults once they saw the vandalism by the children saying, “get out fags” they believed the boys were still referring to homosexuals. So, when the mayor found out that Eric, Stan, Kyle, and Kenny, at the school assembly, she angrily told the boys to go to her office. Once there, the boys promised her that the word had no intended nor insulting reference towards homosexuals, but to biker gangs (Parker and Parker, 2009). Schulzke claims, “A word’s meaning is determined by its use so meaning can be intentionally changed by adopting new uses” (Schulzke, 2012, p.25). This would support the children’s’ argument as they claimed they had no prior knowledge to the word’s meaning. Instead they gave the word their own meaning. This shows just how quick the meaning of a word can change even in a single generation. But is still considered inappropriate as the towns people still believe the word refers to the meaning known by most as an insulting term toward homosexuals.

The word itself shows just how easy it is, not only, for a meaning of a word to change over time, but how the word is interpreted over time. The meaning has changed from referring to as an insult towards women, to sticks, to an insulting word towards homosexuals and now an insulting word towards biker gangs (Parker & Parker, 2009). Even through the years and the many changes of the meaning the word fag still comes to be a word of insult, but now it is just directed towards biker gangs. This shows that the intended meaning of the word changes more than the actual definition, to the point, that even homosexuals adopt the new idea. Now with the support of the homosexuals in the show, it leads to a wide spread acceptance of the word’s new meaning.

Like in many South Park episodes, Schulzke argues that to understand a word, perception and as well as intention must be understood to fully understand a word (Schulzke, 2012). But, in this episode these ideas clash resulting in the confusion amongst everyone in the town. The

constant usage of the new meaning of the word fag is used so much that eventually the word does catch on throughout the entire town. So much so that in the episode the writer even brings a dictionary official to completely change the word's definition in the dictionary (Parker & Parker, 2009). This goes against what Schulzke as he claims that the even with the repeated usage of the word's new definition it still won't affect how people perceive the word (Schulzke, 2012). The episode sheds light on just how powerful the word "fag" can be and how, in today's world, offensive a word can be when used towards a group of people.

The episode shows just how easy it's for a word to transform its meaning, even in a single generation. And in my opinion the intended meaning of a word far outweighs the way people perceive a word. What may have started as a confusing situation, quickly progressed throughout the entire town until everyone caught on to what the boys were trying to accomplish. Schulzke argues that an increase of usage of a word does not change the meaning of it (Schulzke, 2012). Which is something I disagree with, because the meanings of words are changed every day. A great example today is high school; I remember there being a handful of words that were simply made up, but the creators gave a specific meaning to that word. And eventually the word would catch on and become a new trend amongst the student. This goes to show that whatever the word is, the meaning the speaker is attempting to get across is far more important than the perceived meaning as language is an ever-changing field.

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