

Write an essay of no less than 250 words completing the following tasks (100%):

First, summarize the following essay in one paragraph (15%); then discuss your own opinion on the main argument of the essay. Can you think of at least one example of the Chinese language use which supports or rebuts the essay's main argument? Make sure you include this example in your discussion. (85%)

Double-edged words: The secret meaning of "feisty"

Women and men face double-standards. That this should show up in the language is no surprise. Men who put themselves forward at work are "assertive", women who do the same are more often "pushy" or "bossy"; men are "persistent" whereas women are "nagging"; men are "frustrated", women "upset". A man has a lot to say; a woman is "chatty". A man discusses the doings of his colleagues and rivals; a woman "gossips".

Readers tempted to doubt can check for themselves. For an impressionistic survey, type "gossip" into Google, click on "images" and see who appears to be doing it; then try the same with "nagging" and "bossy". For hard data, try Google's "Ngram" viewer, which shows the frequency of words and phrases among the hundreds of billions of words in the books scanned by Google, spanning centuries. One of the most common words following "gossiping" is "old". And the most common words to follow "gossiping old" are, in this order: "women", "woman", "men", "lady" and "ladies".

Some words are trickier than mere double-standards: those using them may think they are paying a kind of compliment, whereas what is heard is something between condescension and insult. A case in point is "feisty". Those who use it might think that the word connotes "spirited". It is often heard by women, though, as carrying a whiff of surprise that a woman would show such spirit.

"Nonsense", some will reply. *The Economist* has used "feisty" recently to refer to Greece's leftist government, a South African tabloid, a (male) Argentinian presidential candidate and Singaporean opposition bloggers. But it is also used fairly frequently with female figures. The common thread seems to be a sense of smallness or underdog status: nobody calls a jowly dictator or heavyweight boxer "feisty". Google's book data say much the same. "Little" is one of the most common words to follow "feisty", and the most common words to follow "feisty little" are "girl", "man",

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“thing”, “guy”, “woman” and “lady”. Rounding out the top ten words following “feisty little”, intriguingly, are “Irishman” and “bastard”. This closes the case on whether you should call anyone “feisty”, and especially a woman, if you want to pay a sincere compliment. In fact, because of the word’s feminine associations, it can be especially condescending to a man, belittling and feminising at the same time. For an unmixed compliment, try “passionate” or “outspoken”.

Other words carry a compliment and an unwelcome sideswipe at the same time. Those who are “spry” are not just lively, but “lively for their advanced age”. Those who are “jolly” or “jovial” are more often pot-bellied than stick-thin. “Statuesque” women may or may not appreciate the reminder that they are tall or full-figured. “Bubbly” and “vivacious” go beyond cheerful to imply a lack of seriousness. And if there is a compliment that black Americans resent above all, it is “articulate”, which is heard carrying a note of surprise.

A widespread habit of lightly taking offence can be a burden on everyone. Take the debate over “microaggressions” on American university campuses, defined as the small humiliations minority students endure. These might be described as too small for the speaker to notice, yet too big for the hearer to ignore. On one hand, some insults are clearly real—a student from California being asked where she is “really” from, because of an Asian-American face.

On the other hand, two sociologists, Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning, argued in a paper published in 2014 that a “culture of victimhood” is replacing the “culture of dignity”. Harvard is currently seeking to rename the faculty members who oversee student halls because their traditional title—“house masters”—reminds some of slavery. Steven Pinker, a psychologist and language scholar at Harvard, tweeted drily that: “1) All words have more than one meaning. 2) Mature adults resist taking pointless offence.”

One need not score this debate entirely in favour of the microaggressors or their victims. In any case, it always pays to choose words well. The case against calling an opinionated woman “feisty” need not be made in the newfangled language of microaggression; it is often just lazy. Thoughtfully searching for the right word, free of off-notes, does more than avoid offence. It makes speakers and writers scour their minds for original and arresting language—a good thing in itself.

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