

**Другостта: дискурси, етикети и стереотипи**  
**Otherness: Discourses, Labels and Stereotypes**

**Who is the Other?**  
**How to subvert discriminating language**  
**and stereotypes from within.**  
**Two practical examples**

**Paola Giorgis**

wom.an.ed (women's studies in anthropology and education; [www.womaned.org](http://www.womaned.org))  
In Other Words. A Contextualized Dictionary to Problematize Otherness ([www.iowdictionary.org](http://www.iowdictionary.org))

E-mail: [paola.giorgis@womaned.org](mailto:paola.giorgis@womaned.org); [paola.giorgis@iowdictionary.org](mailto:paola.giorgis@iowdictionary.org)

**Abstract:** In this contribution I discuss how the (re)production of Otherness can be problematised presenting two practical examples. The first considers the encounter of Otherness from the perspective of another language: by shuffling individual and collective representations, such an experience reveals how Otherness is a relative and situated construct determined by asymmetrical power relations. Drawing from my long practice as a foreign language teacher, I briefly present an activity that I developed in a multicultural high school in Italy in an urban context to show how the construction of Otherness can be problematised starting by challenging the usual perspective from which we look at ourselves. The second example discusses the international project of the online dictionary *In Other Words. A Contextualized Dictionary to Problematize Otherness* ([www.iowdictionary.org](http://www.iowdictionary.org)) that analyses, problematises and subverts discriminating language through the critical and creative analysis of keywords by using pieces of literature, works of art, cartoons, videos, as well as by deconstructing derogatory visual and rhetorical strategies. The actual practices here presented as examples are grounded in several theoretical and critical perspectives, further evidence that practices and theories are not separate entities, but they rather nurture each other since it is precisely the dialogue between thought and action that shapes human experience, fostering awareness and responsibility for our common world (Arendt 1958/1998). [1]

**Keywords:** otherness, another language, discriminating language, stereotypes, asymmetrical power relations, visual and rhetorical strategies.

## 1. Who is the Other? A brief survey of some theoretical approaches

The issue of Otherness has been studied by many different disciplines and from many different perspectives – anthropology, psychology, critical studies, intercultural studies, are just a few of them.

Having its most prominent focus in the study of the Other, throughout its historical development Anthropology has come to recognize the intrinsic violence of the vertical hierarchy of who-studies (the Researcher)/who-is-studied (the Other). On the one hand, such an approach has operated a shift in the direction of the gaze, where the study of the ‘unfamiliar’ has become a way to interrogate and critically reconsider the ‘familiar’. On the other hand, such a radical change of the perspective has sustained a symmetric and participatory commitment leading to processes of understanding, empowerment and transformation able to challenge the structural and systemic inequalities and injustices of neo-liberal capitalism and neo-colonialism (e.g., Michael Herzfeld’s engaged anthropology, David Graeber’s radical anthropology, and the non-hegemonic anthropology of the Lausanne Manifestos).

From a psychological perspective, in her seminal work *Étrangers à nous-mêmes* (Foreigners to Ourselves 1988) [2], the linguist, psychoanalyst and philosopher Julia Kristeva sustains that we can become ourselves only by apprehending our own “*notre troublante altérité*” [our disturbing otherness], (p. 284). Awareness thus plays a fundamental role as the pivotal process when our own otherness manifests to ourselves, an awareness that is by no means confined to an individual level but rather moves into the outer world, as it is only by acknowledging our own otherness that we can create the conditions to be with others.

Critical Intercultural Studies (Nakayama & Halualani 2012) [3] have long been exposing that the construct – and construction – of Otherness does not happen in neutral spaces but rather in contexts and under conditions that are determined by historical, cultural, political, and economic factors. Indeed, who has the power to define the Other as such? The Other is demarcated through a neo-colonial gaze that manifests asymmetrical status of power and labelled as the representative of a homogeneous (minority) group with no in-group differences, with the consequence that Otherness is de facto naturalized as a static, homogeneous, and unproblematic state.

Finally, a definition from Intercultural Studies states that: “being essentially about social relationships, Otherness depends on context, situational position and time” (Praxmarer 2016) [4]. If Otherness “is constitutively and inexorably linked with Sameness and Self - no conceptualization of the Other (‘Them’) is possible without a conceptualization of Same and Self (‘Us’) (ibidem), the point is who

can decide and from which positioning who is ‘us’ (the in-group) and who is ‘them’ (the out-group). The trend to include some people because of their similarities and to exclude others because of their differences has become much more complex nowadays, when

three mobility revolutions of the past decades (human migrations, new information and communication technologies and flows, and globalizing markets) have destroyed relatively stable and territorialized figures of the Other and created new, transient, ever changing and space - independent figures, such as the refugee, the immigrant, the migrant labourer, the ‘global nomad’, but also the ubiquitous (inner) enemy or terrorist” (*ibidem*).

Several intersectional factors converge into the core issue of who has the power to define the Other as such from which position, for which purposes, and under which socio-cultural and historical conditions. At its core, the construct of Otherness thus reveals asymmetric relations of power between individuals and groups, a condition that has been defined as ‘Othering’ – a word originally coined in 1985 by Gayatri Spivak [5], who grounded the construct on previous philosophical theorizations (Hegel, Derrida, Foucault) and on her post-colonial studies – that is “the process by which the empire can define itself against those it colonizes, excludes and marginalizes” (as quoted in Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 201: 171) [6]. ‘Othering’ has now become a key construct to define the attitude of “treating people from another group as essentially different from and generally inferior to the group you belong to” (Oxford University Dictionary). Such a construct is being used by several authors (e.g., Wodak 2015) [7] to expose how it follows well-known rhetorical strategies and argumentation fallacies, such as for example finding a scapegoat or using hyperboles for the out-group and of euphemisms for the in-group, as I also widely discuss in a previous contribution for this Journal (Giorgis, 2020 - Issue 44) [8].

As individuals living in multicultural environments, and as educators, whose task is to favour the development of the future intercultural citizens and their participatory parity to public life and debate (Frazer in Frazer & Honneth, 2004) [9], it is our ethical and political concern to question how we can address and subvert the (re)production and the dissemination of Otherness in order to challenge the reification, the stigmatization, the stereotyping or the folklorization of the Other. Such an action also moves in the wider direction of confronting predominant and divisive narratives that define and box-in individuals and groups according to their linguacultural backgrounds, often to serve conservative if not reactionary agendas.

From my personal and professional experience, the combination of a critical and creative approach can serve the purpose. I think that the ‘creative’ and the ‘critical’ go together as they are both able to offer a different perspective on things. Luke (2004) [10] states that “for the critical to happen, there must be some actual dissociation from one’s available explanatory texts and discourses – a denaturalization and discomfort and ‘making the familiar strange” (pp. 26-27): in other words, ‘critical’ requires “an analytic move to self-position oneself as Other” (ibidem).

Consistent with both approaches – the creative and the critical – lies the use of the indirectness and the subversiveness offered by irony. The simplest and most accredited definition of irony is ‘to say something to mean something else’. Yet, irony has multifaceted aspects that can be critically, creatively, and rhetorically exploited towards the goal of the subversion of predominant discourses. Irony implies to speak from a different perspective, a liminal space where things – and ourselves – can be re-apprehended differently, allowing us to question the taken-for-granted assumptions, concepts, and values. By proposing an alternative, often subversive, reading of reality, irony favours the beneficial exercise of questioning and doubting, a fundamental process that shapes human consciousness (Colebrook 2004). [11] In the following sections, I discuss how the combination of creativity, criticality, and irony can work in a critical intercultural perspective in a classroom activity as well as in the wider context of the online project of the dictionary *In Other Words*.

### **1. Challenging Othering through stereotypes. A classroom activity**

For over thirty-five years I have been teaching English in Italian high schools in an urban context to students coming from different linguacultural backgrounds. In my practice I have often used the English language, literature, and visual arts to help develop critical intercultural awareness. With such a goal, it is not so much relevant what you teach, but how to teach it, using all activities to shift the perspective from which we look at ourselves and others. For example, according to the philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum, the experience of literary texts can help the readers to grasp causes, effects, and circumstances that are usually unseen or confused in the flux of real life. Furthermore, Nussbaum sustains that literature possesses a political quality, since it offers the possibility to enter the world and the thoughts of individuals who can be very different from us, thus favouring a critical re-apprehension of the self and the others leading to a mutual comprehension across diversities (Nussbaum 1995, 2010) [12], [13].

Also works of art can favour such beneficial shift by visually re-orientating

our gaze, for example indicating how the presence or the absence of some details or subjects manifest hierarchies of power (Berger 2008). [14] That is efficaciously exemplified by the artist Kehinde Wiley [15], who reproduces great masterpieces of the past substituting the protagonists with black people whom he street-casts. By turning the ‘familiar’ into ‘unfamiliar’ he reverses the perspective of the visual representation of power, social status, and wealth, thus visually foregrounding historical processes of domination and discrimination. Other visual examples that subvert predominant discourses can be found in the works by street artists such as Banksy [16] and Cibo [17]. The first often juxtaposes two incongruous elements to foreground the incongruity – if not the hidden violence – of what we take for granted of everyday media representations, while the second covers Nazi swastikas and right-wings symbols with colourful images of Italian food (= *cibo*) such as pizza or steaming spaghetti, thus turning emblems of ferocity and inhumanity into joyful images connected with conviviality. However, also more traditional activities such as Grammar Lessons can be oriented in a critical perspective since “traditional language learning activities such as a grammar lesson can [... excite] opportunities for linking the microstructures of the text with the macrostructures of society” (Norton & Toohey 2004: 6) [18]. I widely discuss how foreign languages, literary texts and works of art can work in a critical intercultural perspective in many articles, chapters in collective volumes, and in two monographs (e.g., Giorgis 2103, 2015, 2016, 2018a, 2018b, 2019, 2020) [19] [20] [21] [22] [23] [24], presenting several activities that dismantle pre-assumptions on individuals and groups, and that can be easily replicated in different educational environments.

As an example, I here shortly discuss Step 3 of a wider and more comprehensive activity that is fully described in my monograph from 2018 (Giorgis 2018a). I conducted this activity in a multicultural high school class with students coming from different linguacultural backgrounds. They were all native Italians, except for a girl who was born in Egypt (but of Italian citizenship since her father was an Italo-Tunisian). The activity was structured in several steps that moved in the direction of a critical apprehension of Otherness as a situated and relational construct. In Steps 1 and 2 we watched some videos and engaged in discussions and activities to acknowledge how we are all bearers of multiple identities, belongings, and affiliations. Then, Step 3 was organised in a way as to approach Otherness from the intercultural perspective of one’s own otherness. To develop this step, I used stereotypes since they widely contribute to construct predominant narratives on groups – at their best offering a simplified reading of complex stories, and at their worst constituting the ground for the deliberate perpetuation

of discrimination, prejudices, and injustices. The most invisible stereotypes are the ones that regard the group we belong to or associate with; therefore, being the class composed by native Italians, I began showing the students several videos on how ‘others’ see ‘us’. The videos I chose were from different sources – YouTube videos, cartoons, movie clips, etc. All of them presented Italians as individuals who always wear sunglasses and expensive brands, eat spaghetti and pizza, drink red wine, gesticulate, speak too loudly, drive crazily and park even worse, deal with Mafia, are picky about how coffee is made, and so on. Gender stereotypes were portrayed, too: all Italian men are mamma’s boys, and all Italian women are either super-models or super-mothers cooking large meals and overfeeding their kids. My students were quite annoyed at these portrayals, and so we began discussing what made them feel so uneasy – and, sometimes, even angry. A final question was then left on the ground: if we are not happy with the stereotypes that define ‘us’, how do we deal with the stereotypes that define ‘the others’? We then watched a video that seemed to replicate the stereotype of an immigrant flower vendor, only to reverse it at the end. The whole activity was then constructed on a double subversion: discussing how stereotypes construct and disseminate pre-assumptions on individuals and groups, we practically experienced how we can problematise and deconstruct such narratives starting precisely from ourselves. A most relevant element was that the discussion took place in English, a non-native language for all students, a fact that allowed us to further distance ourselves from our usual positioning and linguacultural system of references, thus favouring a critical and intercultural awareness on the construction of cultural attributions and stereotypes.

## **2. Challenging Othering through its own words. An example from the online dictionary *In Other Words***

As the readers of this Journal know (Giorgis et al. 2021 - Issue 46) [25], the ongoing project of the online dictionary *In Other Words. A Contextualized Dictionary to Problematize Otherness* ([www.iowdictionary.org](http://www.iowdictionary.org)) consists in the discussion, problematisation, and subversion of recurring keywords that, in different contexts and in different countries, contribute to the (re)production of Otherness. The dictionary is an international project that involves scholars and practitioners from different formations and experiences. Each keyword is analysed according to several steps – etymology, cultural specificity, problematisation, communication strategies, and subversion. Though the dictionary adopts English as a lingua franca, it also vindicates a multilingual stance since the keywords are introduced by a long abstract/excerpt written in the native language of the author

or in a language other-than English. The analysis of the keywords ends with a series of questions that are meant to open a discussion capable of going beyond the dictionary itself, involving the readers inhabiting different social and educational contexts. The dictionary also contains a specific section of the keywords of COVID-19 analysing how, in different countries, words have been used and mobilized to create specific narratives of the pandemic and construct different forms of Otherness. Several are the keywords that have been discussed so far, such as *ageism, corruption, foreignness, gender, immigrant, incel, internet political troll, patriotism, propaganda, tolerance, and tradition* in the main section, and *#mask saves* (Brazil), *hearth* (Bulgaria), *war* (Bulgaria, Italy), *new heroes* (Greece) in the COVID-19 section.

All these keywords have been discussed from several communicative, rhetorical, and discursive perspectives according to different critical theoretical approaches – CDA (critical discourse analysis), cultural and media studies, argumentative theory, critical language studies, critical sociolinguistics, etc. Moreover, the analysis of each keyword also presents visual materials from works of art, advertising, the media, cartoons, online videos, etc. The combination of all these different elements allows to develop and orientate the discussion of each entry in the direction of a critical and creative deconstruction of discriminatory language. I hereby briefly present how the combination of the different elements described above can work in practice in one entry: ageism.

### **2.1. Ageism (<https://www.iowdictionary.org/word/ageism>).**

Ageism refers to the stereotyping and/or the enacting of discriminations and prejudices against individuals on the grounds of their age. Though the term was coined to define discrimination against the elderly (Butler 1969) [26], through time ageism is more and more intended as discrimination based on the grounds of age – thus including, for example, young people.

I developed the analysis and the discussion of the entry [27] according to some critical approaches that regard age as a major social stratifier together with class, race and gender, and consider how all these intersectional factors impact on the individual experience of ageing, as well as on the social perception and representation of age. After concluding such analysis, I worked on the subversion, showing how stereotypes on age can be challenged. I presented different examples – a cartoon, an activist group, a feminist essay, an initiative of the World' Health Organization – noticing in particular that the use of irony can be especially effective to reverse predominant discourses on the elderly.

For reasons of brevity, I here report only the example of the activist group of

the Raging Grannies (<https://raginggrannies.org>) [28], an international group of old ladies and activists who protest against racism, inequalities, and war marching in the streets dressed in frills and laces. By ironically adhering to the ‘innocent old lady’ stereotype, they subvert it from within, promoting the empowerment of elderly women and showing that political activism and demonstrations are not the prerogative of a young age.

### Conclusion

Both the classroom activity and the dictionary entry show that the construction of Otherness can be subverted from within, that is by using the same visual and rhetorical devices that (re)produce it. Deconstructing Otherness from within is a particularly effective practice since it operates in an indirect way, favouring the beneficial change of the perspective from which we look at things, ourselves, and the others. However, these examples also show that problematizing and challenging the construction of Otherness – either in a classroom or in an on/offline open discussion – are not solitary endeavours, but rather collective experiences. We discuss about Otherness with Others, and therefore we engage not only with words but with people, too. Not only do we consider how words shape our understanding of the world, but also how they shape our being-with-others. According to Arendt (1958/1988) [1], it is through action that we manifest our identity (and our difference) to others. Therefore, by adopting and developing actual practices as such, we engage in a plural experience able to conjoin awareness and action, which means taking responsibility for the world we share.

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