

Bitch. This word appears frequently in social conversation. Its appearance here is much more than an excuse to use a 'dirty' word in an inappropriate place. It is lens for insight into relationships between language, gender, and identity.

The word 'bitch' has many connotations. It can be an evocation of anger, an expression of desire to dominate, or a criticism of female assertiveness. Feminists use the word 'bitch' to claim empowerment through defiance of traditional gender roles.

Language shapes and is shaped by political realities, from interpersonal to international relations. Thought about the meaning of the word 'bitch' explores these issues. The utterance 'bitch' demonstrates that word options affect the content of expression. The choice of the word 'bitch' is potent; it dictates mood, gender and social roles, and power.

The word 'bitch' plays a role in the dictation of gender roles. 'Bitch' characterizes a womyn as aggressive, outgoing, or mean. A bitch is a womyn who is something that, according to stereotype, womyn should not be. She is a womyn out of her place. A man who calls a womyn a bitch is sending her back to 'her place'; a womyn who celebrates bitchiness is refusing that placement. 'Bitch' constitutes (and is constituted by) gender identity.

When Deidre McCloskey was first called 'bitch' after becoming a womyn, she explained that she was only happy to be herself. The deployment 'bitch' is one of many linguistic microcosms that reminds us that self-identity is bound up in descriptive choices, discourse, social power; and that many of those institutions are gendered.