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English Composition I
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Summary of
"A Question of Language"
Revision

In her definition essay, Gloria Naylor defines how the written and spoken language can give different meanings to a word. She considers language a powerful tool used by writers and everyday people, to express their feelings and capture reality and life.

According to Naylor, the "written word [is] inferior to the spoken," which uses the "sight, sound, smell and touch" (232) of the moment. To exemplify how the same word can have different meanings, she describes the moment when she became aware of the word "nigger." When a boy in the class would call her a "nigger," she instantly knew that it was a bad word. The teacher confirmed her suspicions, when she "scold[ed] him for using a bad word" (232).

The real meaning of the word was unclear. She realized that she had heard the word at home, many times before. Even so, she never thought of the word "nigger", as being a bad word, because, "it was set within contexts and inflexions that caused it to register in [her] mind as something else" (232).

In her family, the word "nigger" can be used as an approval for the qualities of a man. When used by a woman, as a possessive adjective, it represents a "form of endearment" (233). It also

symbolizes power and strength. As a plural, it defines a group that “overstepped the bounds of decency” (233), lazy people, or people without manners.

Although there were so many ways to use the word, a woman would never be called a nigger. Maybe that’s how she realized that when the boy called her “nigger”, it was an insult.

For Naylor, it will never be considered as “racism,” when her family uses the word “nigger”; but it is, when used by a white person.

Her essay puts a delicate spin on the meaning of words and mostly on their symbolic connotation. Reading her essay makes you re-evaluate the way one addresses other people, and how one can hurt with words, deliberately or not.

Works Cited

Naylor, Gloria. "A Question of Language." *Connections: A Multicultural Reader for Writers*.
Editor Judith A. Stanford. California: Mayfield, 1997. 232-234.