Extra Credit Video Critique Assignment

Introduction

I chose to watch the video titled *Mean Girls* (2004) in order to illustrate the concept of *linguistic convergence* described in Chapter 5, “Language: Barrier and Bridge,” of our textbook, *Looking Out Looking In*, by Ronald B. Adler and Russell F. Proctor II. On page 170, *linguistic convergence* is defined as “the process of adapting one’s speech style to match that of others.” I believe that the movie perfectly illustrates this topic in numerous scenes depicting Cady Heron (played by Lindsay Lohan), a new girl in an American high school originally home schooled in South Africa, attempting to fit in with the popular clique in school, the Plastics.

The movie also clearly illustrates the topic of *differing conversational styles between genders*, discussed on pages 182-183 of our textbook. The main character, Cady, often speaks differently while around her female friends, the Plastics, than she does with her love interest, Aaron Samuels (played by Jonathan Bennett). These scenes show how communication styles often vary between women to women conversations, relying most on a more personal conversational style while asking questions, and men to women conversations in which men often interrupt women.

I decided on this movie also because of how it related to my own high school experiences. I attended a high school with cliques, but they were never as defined as they are portrayed as being in the movie *Mean Girls*. At my high school, although a person would have one main group of friends, she/he also was able to have friends from other groups as well, often crossing cultural lines. I was a bit intrigued and excited about
analyzing a movie about, perhaps, a more classical high school experience than my own. But although I never had quite the same experiences with exclusive groups in high school, my school definitely did have very similar unofficial social rules to those seen in the movie, such as that one was expected to act a certain way when with particular groups of friends and then to modify their personalities once again while with others.
Description

The movie *Mean Girls* begins with Lindsay Lohan’s character, Cady, attending her first day of American public high school. She is overwhelmed, confused, and unaware of many of the unwritten social rules associated with the high school environment. As she walks through the cafeteria full of dining tables exclusive to each clique, she is stopped near the Plastic’s table and asked by a male member of another clique if she would like her “muffin buttered.” This is an example of **equivocal language**, or “statements that have more than one commonly accepted definition” (pg. 159) because Cady thinks he is genuinely asking if she would care to have a muffin with butter on it when in fact he means it in a sexually vulgar way.

The head Plastic, Regina George (played by Rachel McAdams), soon takes Cady under her wing. Cady then learns another lesson in equivocal language while being asking questions about her life. Regina exclaims to Cady, “Shut up,” over and over again, meaning ‘No way!’ or ‘Really?’ but Cady unknowingly responds by saying “I didn’t say anything.” At this point Cady’s confusion is clear but she soon learns to use the same language that she was once so baffled by.

Cady is soon transformed into a “mean girl” with the help of the Plastics and the use of language. As explained on page 168, language has a profound impact on one’s identity. “Language can shape our perceptions of the world around us and reflect the attitudes we hold toward one another” (pg.168). The concept of linguistic convergence can be seen as Cady’s identity begins to change, reflecting that of the Plastic clique. She begins using language that is similar to that used by the Plastics in order to show affiliation with them and exercise power over others. “…Communicators are attracted to
others whose style of speaking is similar to theirs. Likewise, communicators who want to show affiliation with one another adapt their speech in a variety of ways, including their choice of vocabulary, [etc.]... when communicators want or need approval they often adapt their speech to accommodate the other person’s style, trying to say the ‘right thing’ or speak in a way that will help them fit in” (pg. 170). Cady starts using words like “fetch” meaning ‘cool,’ “biotch,” and phrases like “shut up” instead of her everyday language in order to sound like and ultimately become one of the Plastics.

Cady not only gains power through this association and group membership but also through linguistic divergence (pg. 171) from the other, less popular people in school. The fact that the Plastics use this specific language within their group but no one else does or can use the same language around school sets them apart from others, once again confirming their high status. “Powerful speech... gets the desired results in mainstream North American and European cultures…” (pg. 172). Cady learns, from Regina, to use intimidating language in the form of insults and fake complements to manipulate others and get what she wants out of a situation.

Conversational styles differ and change between the different characters in the movie Mean Girls. As described on page 182 of our textbook, “women’s speech is more typically indirect, elaborate, and focused on relationships.” This can be seen in the conversations between girls in the movie, as they gossip about others. The textbook explains that women “use conversation [in this way] to pursue social needs” (pg. 183). The textbook also states “research has revealed that in mixed-sex conversations, men interrupt women far more than the other way around” (pg. 182). In conversations between men and women in the movie however, like those between Aaron and Cady or
Aaron and Regina, the opposite seems to be true. Cady or Regina interrupt Aaron as a means of manipulation and to demonstrate power over him, showing other girls, including each other, that he is their boyfriend and property.

Language is frequently used as a means of gaining power or affiliation with a desired group in real life and is simply mimicked in the movie *Mean Girls*. But because of this connection with reality, the movie’s themes are easy to relate to and clearly related to the main ideas in our text and of this course as a whole.
Conclusion

I personally believe that the concepts of linguistic convergence used in order to obtain affiliation and power, the impact of language on identity, and conversational style were all clearly and effectively demonstrated in the movie Mean Girls. The movie made it possible for young viewers to connect with these themes without distracting from the moral of the story: to be yourself. I do believe, however, that the textbook does not account for or attempt to explain that many times, linguistic convergence can be unconscious and done simply because of the increased time that groups of friends often spend with one another. The textbook presents those who engage in linguistic convergence as always doing so knowingly and for the purpose of gaining acceptance, as does the movie, when in reality this often occurs without the person’s knowledge or any deliberate planning of their own.

In this way, it is clear how language can act as both a barrier, between people and ideas, and a bridge, forming relationships and bonds between them too. In the movie Mean Girls, these barriers can be seen between the Plastics and the rest of the high school student body and even within their own clique as Regina tries to control the other members of the Plastic clique with the same tactics used while reigning over others in school. However, bridges are formed through the use of language between the Plastics, as alliances are formed against Regina, and between Cady and Aaron as they start to pursue a love relationship. I believe that Mean Girls was and continues to be so popular because of how intriguing and relatable these underlying themes truly are.