

**Language as Both Oppressive and Emancipating Power for Females  
in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale***

**CHAN, Sze Lok (Charlotte)**

**(Supervisor: Professor Grant Hamilton)**

**Abstract**

The topic of this capstone project – ‘Language as Both Oppressive and Emancipating Power for Females’ is inspired by the quote by British feminist novelist Angela Carter – “language is power, life and the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination and liberation.”

During the wave of French post-structuralist feminism, many feminist writers seek to develop a style of writing that resist and transcend the limitation cast by linear and logical patriarchal discourse, namely ‘l’écriture féminine’. *The Handmaid's Tale* can be regarded as an example of l’écriture féminine for it echoes this feminine style of writing in terms of not only content, which centres on the discussion of autonomy of female bodies, but also narrative style. Female writing is indirect and diverse, as in narration of Offred is often fragmented, teetering between the present and the past.

Bringing the 1980s-historical context and the French feminism movement into account, this project examines how Margaret Atwood approaches female existence in the light of its inseparable relationship with language, highlighting phallogocentrism in English literary traditions in her 1985 speculative fiction *The Handmaid's Tale*. On one hand, phallogocentric language becomes an oppressive agency that undermines women’s intellectual liberty, individuality and interpersonal relationship in the extreme misogynist dystopian reality. On the other hand, the autobiographical narrative of Offred, the female protagonist, deconstructs and appropriate phallogocentric languages for the assertion of self-identity, offering a telling testimony to the resistant and generative power of language in combating the disenfranchising effects on female bodies and autonomy in a patriarchal society.

## Reflection

I am beyond grateful to have taken on this rewarding project that holds a close tie to two crucial identities of mine, a language student and a female, as a perfect conclusion of my four years of undergraduate studies. *The Handmaid's Tale* underscores the connection between perversion of language and repression of females by the authoritarian states. Meanwhile, the novel proves the power of literature as a liberating force against authoritarianism, giving hope to the oppressed in times of resistance. Researching on *The Handmaid's Tale* in a time of political turmoil in Hong Kong particularly relatable and meaningful for it enables me to critically examine the role of literature in society, shedding light on my role as a language student in the current social movement for freedoms. Moreover, this interdisciplinary project, together with other literary texts I have encountered as an English major, has significantly strengthened my knowledge in linguistics, gender and politics, my language competence, and most importantly, my fluidity in thinking, which forms a solid foundation for me future engagement in society.

On a final note, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Grant Hamilton, for his patience, guidance, and wholehearted support for my capstone project.