
CALLING OUT THE SYMBOL RULERS

A FENCE SIEVE LANGUAGE

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A culture cannot be discriminatingly accepted, much less be modified, except by persons who have seen through it—by persons who have cut holes in the confining stockade of verbalized symbols and so are able to look at the world and, by reflection, at themselves, in a new and relatively unprejudiced way.

Aldous Huxley, “Culture and the Individual” (1963)

During the first months of 2007, the American public, politicians, and media have banded together to up-armor our “confining stockade of verbalized symbols.” Instead of cutting holes through which to self-reflexively evaluate ourselves, our language, and our behaviors, we have reinforced our ancient, pathological attitudes toward words and the people who use them.

The Don Imus affair (Google: *nappy-headed hos, jigaboos and wannabees, Rutgers women’s basketball, MSNBC, CBS radio, WFAN, the Rev. Al Sharpton*) consumed the most print space and air time. But let’s not forget some of the other examples of language behaviors that have prompted outrage, lawsuits, indifference, or in some cases, applause.

- Isaiah Washington, an actor on the television series “Grey’s Anatomy,” checked into a rehab center and began counseling after using the word *faggot* in reference to another actor on the show. (1)
- Ann Coulter, the blonde darling of a certain segment of conservative Republicans, joked during a presentation to the Conservative Political Action Conference that, “I was going to have a few comments on the other Democratic presidential candidate John Edwards, but it turns out you have to go into rehab if you use the word ‘faggot,’ so I — so kind of an impasse, can’t really talk about Edwards.” (2)
- The family of a high school freshman filed a lawsuit against officials at Maria Carillo High School in California claiming the school denied the First Amendments rights of their daughter. The family is Mormon. The

utterance at issue concerns the daughter's response to classmates who needled her with questions such as, "Do you have 10 moms?" She replied, "That's so gay." School officials gave her a warning on the grounds that it has an obligation to protect gay students from harassment. The parents' suit claims the phrase *that's so gay* "enjoys widespread currency in youth culture." The girl says the phrase means, "That's so stupid; that's so silly; that's so dumb." (3)

- The day after he officially announced his candidacy for the Democratic party's nomination for President, Senator Joe Biden (D-Delaware) said of fellow candidate Senator Barack Obama (D-Illinois), "I mean, you got the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy," Biden said. "I mean, that's a storybook, man." He was immediately besieged with controversy over the words "clean" and "articulate." (4)
- Four days later, Senator Obama illustrated how quickly "what goes around comes around" when he used the word "wasted" to refer to the lives of U.S. soldiers killed in Iraq. (5)
- A partner from one of the most prestigious law firms in the country, Fulbright & Jaworski, visited the law school at Duke University for recruiting purposes. During the course of an interview, the partner recounted a story about one of the firm's founders (Leon Jaworski) and his commitment to justice in the 1920s. Jaworski represented a black man accused of murder in Waco, TX, and faced a district attorney who used "the n word" to refer to the accused. A student who heard the story objected and complained, the dean of the law school wrote a letter to the entire law school, and the chairman of the executive committee at Fulbright & Jaworski traveled to Duke to apologize. (6,7)
- New York City Councilman Leroy Comrie embarked on a campaign to 'voluntarily' ban "the n word." His campaign was featured in an "investigative report" on "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart" by the "investigative team" of Larry Wilmore (an American black) and John Oliver (a British white). During the report, Oliver refers only to "the word" and leaves it to Wilmore to fill in the blanks with the word *nigger*. (8)
- "The Colbert Report," with Stephen Colbert, immediately followed Stewart's show and featured an interview with Jabari Asim, author of the new book, *The N Word: who can say it, who shouldn't, and why*. (9)
- City officials of the Bronx in New York City labeled a new German army training video as "racist" and demanded an apology from the German military. The video depicts an instructor describing a scenario to a trainee

this way: “You are in the Bronx. A black van is stopping in front of you. Three African-Americans are getting out they are insulting your mother in the worst ways. Act!” (10)

- Rush Limbaugh began referring to Senator Barack Obama and actress Halle Berry, each of mixed-race parentage, as “Halffrican Americans.” (11)

These examples come from just a four-month period. But they reveal just how confining our stockade of verbalized symbols has become.

In other words, it’s become almost impossible to talk sensibly about how we talk. Forget about cutting holes ... we can’t even make a dent.

Not that some haven’t tried. Compare and contrast these attempts at explanation, elucidation, or explication:

If you’re 10 or 100, *nappy-headed ho* means the same thing.

Al Sharpton on “Real Time with Bill Maher” (12)

Did you want to name the book *The N Word* and they said, no, you’ve got to call it *The N Word*, or did you say, I want to name this book *The N Word* and they assumed you meant, you know, the ‘n word’ when in fact you meant the ‘n word’? The ‘n word’ has become so anonymous [sic] with the ‘n word’. Is saying the ‘n word’ pretty much like saying the ‘n word’? Because, I would never say the ‘n word,’ but I don’t want somebody to think I’m saying the ‘n word’ by saying the ‘n word.’

Stephen Colbert to Jabari Asim (9)

It’s really hard to address the language of racism without somehow directly engaging in that language.

Jabari Asim to Stephen Colbert (9)

[After letting loose with 47 “equal opportunity” racial and religious epithets ...] There is absolutely nothing wrong with any of those words, in and of themselves. They’re only words. It’s the context that counts. It’s the user. It’s the intention behind the words that makes them good or bad. The words are completely neutral. The words are innocent. I get tired of people talking about ‘bad words’ and ‘bad language.’ Bullshit! It’s the context that makes them good or bad.

George Carlin (13)

It doesn't matter, the origins of curse words. What matters is that civilization has decreed—arbitrarily, obviously—that certain words are inherently obscene.

Dennis Prager (14)

Words don't 'mean,' only a person does. There is no meaning in a word. We sometimes talk about this as the 'container myth.' Now you can put something in a glass—water, dirt, sand, anything. A glass will hold something, and we can talk about this as a 'container.' A word, however, is not a container in the way a glass is. A container of 'meaning' is a man, a woman. It's you. It's you listening, it is I talking. It is I listening, it's you talking. A word doesn't 'mean.'

Irving J. Lee (15)

Understandably, the use of the word offended the student.

Katharine T. Bartlett, Dean, Duke University School of Law (7)

There is no excuse for what happened on this campus. There is no context for which that is permissible conduct.

Steven Pfeiffer, Fulbright & Jaworski (6)

It seems that two conflicting views are at work here, leading to these questions:

1. Do words have "inherent" meanings that exist and apply irrespective of speaker, listener, or context?
2. Do words have variable meanings that depend on context?
3. Is it more appropriate to talk in terms of "offensive language," in which specific 'bad' words (profanities, obscenities, epithets) *cause* offense, justify outrage, and demand apology?
4. Is it more appropriate to talk in terms of "language that some find offensive," that recognizes that each individual *may respond* according to his or her own standards of what offends them?
5. Do actions like banning, censoring, and penalizing certain words and terms aid or hinder our individual and societal efforts to "cut holes" through our current culture, to progress beyond our prejudices and stereotypes?

From my general semantics perspective, it's pretty easy to answer *no*, *yes*, *no*, *yes*, and *hinder*. What makes this so difficult for most people to understand? Or, what makes it so rewarding for people to perpetuate the "word=thing" identifications? I offer four inter-related possibilities.

Control

Language has always been used as a means for rulers to exercise their power over their dominion. Religious leaders, politicians, business bosses, military commanders, teachers, parents, lawyers ... virtually everyone is subject to someone else's controlling or directive language. We have been conditioned to respond to certain words in specific, somewhat predictable ways. Go to church and you can expect to hear language intended to provoke penitence, guilt, grace, thankfulness, humility, or charity. Go to a political rally and you'll get bombarded with carefully crafted words to evoke patriotism, civic duty, fear, pride, outrage.

As Alfred Korzybski observed in *Science and Sanity*, "those who rule the symbols, rule us." Rulers need predictable results and desired reactions. They need their constituents to identify the labels of choice with the rulers' desired attitudes and behaviors. If the people chose to deliberately and extensionally evaluate the assertions expressed by their rulers, then the rulers might well be forced to rule on substance, rather than by symbol.

Cop-out: Denying Personal Responsibility

Alfred Fleishman, co-founder of public relations giant Fleishman-Hillard, Inc., advocated general semantics in his own unique, street-wise way. One of the simple observations he would share with delinquent and troubled teenagers in St. Louis was, "Just because you call me a son of a bitch, that doesn't make me a son of a bitch." He encountered hundreds of youngsters in detention schools and jails who automatically reacted to being called a name ... just words ... in ways that caused pain, suffering, and despair to their victims, their families, and ultimately themselves. They didn't stop to think that they could react any differently to the name. The label (*boy, nigger, asshole, etc.*) made them do it. The devil must be in those words; remember comedian Flip Wilson's character Geraldine's universal excuse? "The devil made me do it."

A different aspect of personal responsibility is described by Irving J. Lee, who used the term "bypassing" to describe another aspect of lazy, indiscriminant listening. He explained that a listener has two choices when encountering language that isn't quite clear. The aware, responsible listener will ask the speaker, "What do you mean?" or pause to consider what the speaker might have intended. The lazy, unaware listener will immediately proceed to evaluate what the speaker says as if it were the listener talking; in other words, he will assume (or demand) that the speaker uses the same words in the same way as himself. He will maintain that it's the speaker's responsibility to use the 'right' words, rather than the listener's responsibility to evaluate the speaker's intent.

In the latter case, the listener/reactor denies his own responsibility for interpreting, evaluating, and appropriately responding to the words of the speaker. The words (symbols) ‘cause’ the response, just as Pavlov’s bell caused his dog to respond.

Misunderstanding ‘Reality’

As we learn more and more about our brains and nervous systems, Korzybski’s formulation of the abstracting process continues to be validated. The brain orders and constructs our experiences from our sensory interactions through the nervous system to our ultimate evaluations of pleasure, pain, fear, etc. Therefore, like everything else, ‘meaning’ is constructed by each of us, individually and uniquely. As Charles Sanders Pierce put it, “We don’t get meaning, we respond with meaning.”

However, a lot of people don’t quite understand this or don’t want to understand it. There are still many who believe that there is an “objective reality” out there that ought to be perceived “as it is.” They rail against “relativism” without acknowledging the inevitable relativism that results from the natural functioning of six billion different nervous systems. Which one of those six billion is the right one to say what ‘is’ the true meaning or the inherent purpose of a statement, an event, or a symbol?

Identifying the ‘Map’ as the ‘Territory’

Those who advocate eliminating or even banning certain words and phrases do not seem to grasp the symbolic nature of words. They misplace or misallocate their ire toward the word itself rather than on the underlying attitude, beliefs, and behaviors of the individuals who use the word.

Although Jabari Asim tries to straddle a difficult line in proposing that some people can use the word nigger but others shouldn’t, I support his statement quoted previously. From a historical context, you cannot teach *Huckleberry* Finn without using the language of the time and understanding the attitudes of the time. Neither can you arbitrarily dictate (or request, in the case of Councilman Comrie) that *nigger* be stricken and banned from music lyrics.

The hip-hop world took a lot of the collateral damage from the initial Imus bomb, to the extent that rap/hip-hop icon and impresario Russell Simmons co-authored a statement that read, “We recommend that the recording and broadcast industries voluntarily remove/bleep/delete the misogynistic words ‘bitch’ and ‘ho’” as well as “a common racial epithet.”

As if “bleeping” accomplishes anything other than calling attention to itself and, by extension, what got bleeped.

If one thinks through the logical consequences of “bleeping,” one comes full circle to the realization that it’s the *context*, not the *word*, that establishes the basis for offense. Even without benefit of visually observing the following phrases spoken, do you have any doubt as to what the “bleep” stands for?

“I said *drop your bleeping gun!*”

“Go bleep yourself.”

“Get the bleep out of here.”

“You dirty son of a bleep!”

“This tastes so bleeping good ...”

Leave it to the comedians to shine illuminating light on this shadowy subject. In their “investigative” report on Councilman’s Comrie’s quest to ban a “word with no meaning,” Wilborne and Oliver point out the potential consequences:

OLIVER: Leroy, are you at all concerned that we are banning one of the most versatile words in the English language? It can be used as a noun ...

WILBORNE: Yo, yo, whassup, my *nigga*?

OLIVER: A verb ...

WILBORNE: Hey, man, don’t *nigger* those potato chips.

OLIVER: An adjective ...

WILBORNE: Oh, so now you *nigger* rich?

OLIVER: And adverb ...

WILBORNE: Man ... that’s some *niggerly* [bleep].

OLIVER: Are we kissing goodbye to all of this?

COMRIE: I think that all of those usages are just vile and need to be stopped.

OLIVER: What do you say to rappers who need that word in terms of a rhyme scheme?

COMRIE: Need the word? I don’t think you need the word.

WILBORNE: I’m not sure about that Leroy. Finish this phrase ... *I’m not saying she’s a gold digger, but she ain’t messin’ with no broke ...*

COMRIE: Hmm. (to himself) *I’m not saying she’s a gold digger, but she ain’t messing with no broke ... fool.*

WILBORNE: (pause) Do you understand how rap works, Councilman?

Wilborne and Oliver understand that context determines meaning, and, like George Carlin two generations before them, realize that the English language offers unlimited opportunities to poke comedic fun at our arbitrary and multiple usages. As Carlin pointed out thirty years ago, even order establishes context: “You can prick your finger. But don’t finger your prick!”

A more serious reason to object to any type of ban, particularly with epithets, is

that these words carry such strong social stigmas that their usage may serve a valuable purpose. Like the canary in the mine, or smoke that signals the possibility of burning embers, racial and religious epithets can alert us to the possibility of prejudice, bias, and hate within the speaker. If you ban the language, these people may comply with the ban and not say the word, but they may well continue to harbor the feelings and attitudes that may lead to discriminatory and prejudiced behaviors.

Huxley continued his “hole cutter” metaphor with this observation:

What the would-be hole cutter needs is knowledge; knowledge of the past and present history of cultures in all their fantastic variety, and knowledge about the nature and limitations, the uses and abuses, of language.

We can learn a lot from our daily news outlets and entertainment programs regarding our attitudes towards language. Unfortunately, we (English-speaking Americans) seem to be backsliding toward the 19th century in terms of our dependence on the cultural crutch of verbal taboos. Consider how prematurely quaint the words of anthropologist Margaret Mead seem, as reported in an unnamed local newspaper in 1969:

Anthropologist Margaret Mead says that the current binge of written and spoken four-letter words will also pass providing everyone doesn't become uptight about it. It's this uptightness in the current phraseology that is at the heart of the problem. We are in a temporary period when it is exciting to light up some-thing that was dark, saying words that were forbidden, exhibiting all sorts of things that weren't allowed before, but this excitement is going to wear out. (16)

Until we exit this “temporary period” (going on 38 years now) in which we insist on righteously playing “got ‘cha!” with *offensive language*, our public discourse about racism, sexism, violence, drugs, and even taxes will never progress to the substantive from the superficial.

We must be vigilant, however, in clearly discerning and discriminating between the effective uses and the manipulative or ignorant *abuses* of language. The more we focus on the words, labels, and categories, the less we concern ourselves with the individuals who use those symbols, and the individuals upon whom those symbols are slapped. Because the words of Irving J. Lee will forever apply: *We tend to discriminate against people to the degree we fail to distinguish between them.*

NOTES

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3. School sued for reaction to 'That's so gay', March 1, 2007, by Lisa Leff, Associated Press
4. Biden's description of Obama draws scrutiny, February 9, 2007. http://www.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/01/31/biden.obama/index.html?eref=rss_topstories.
5. Is Obama sorry or right about 'wasted' lives? February 13, 2007. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/17131803/>
6. A Word Too Far, by Ann Althouse, *The New York Times*. March 3, 2007.
7. Fulbright & Jaworski Partner Drops the N-Bomb During a Recruiting Interview, February 21, 2007. http://www.abovethelaw.com/2007/02/breaking_fulbright_jaworski_pa.php
8. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Comedy Central, March 28, 2007. http://www.comedycentral.com/motherload/player.jhtml?ml_video=84493&ml_collection=&ml_gateway=&ml_gateway_id=&ml_comedian=&ml_runtime=&ml_context=show&ml_origin_url=%2Fshows%2Fthe_daily_show%2Fvideos%2Fjohn_oliver%2Findex.jhtml%3FplayVideo%3D84493&ml_playlist=&lnk=&is_large=true
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10. Army video 'racist,' says Bronx chief, by Kirsten Grieshaber, Associated Press, April 15, 2007.
11. Limbaugh on Obama: 'Halffrican American.' January 24, 2007. <http://media-matters.org/items/200701240010>,
12. *Real Time with Bill Maher*, HBO, April 13, 2007.
13. *Doin' It Again with George Carlin*, HBO Comedy, 1991.
14. *F**K: A Documentary*, a film by Steve Anderson. 2005. ThinkFilmCompany.com
15. "Talking Sense," video series by Irving J. Lee, 1952. Institute of General Semantics. Fort Worth, Texas.
16. "The Geolinguistics of Verbal Taboo" by Allen Walker Read. Published with permission of The American Society of Geolinguistics in *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, Volume 61 Number 4.