

Language and the Social Construction of Reality: Spinning Social Reality with

Euphemisms

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an exercise I use in my introductory sociology classes that introduces students to language and the social construction of reality process. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is widely taught in introductory sociology classes and suggests that we perceive the world in terms of our own language, and that individual languages produce different and distinct realities for those who speak them; it holds that the reality we experience is unique to our own language. However, there is a need to make students cognizant of how words within our own language are used to structure social reality. The goal of this exercise is to familiarize beginning students of sociology with euphemisms and how they are used in everyday life, and to stimulate thinking and discussion on the power of language and its relationship to social reality. A group activity is used to introduce students to euphemisms. I'll discuss theoretical and teaching literature on language as well as euphemisms first, and return to the actual procedure later.

THEORETICAL LITERATURE

The social construction of reality refers to the processes humans use to actively create and shape the world through social interaction (Berger and Luckmann 1967). Newman (1995:48) describes it as A...a process by which human-created ideas become externally given realities handed down from generation to generation.@

Berger and Luckmann claim that language is an essential part of our existence as human beings. The following passage demonstrates the importance they place on language in understanding our social world (Berger and Luckmann 1967:37):

The common objectivations of everyday life are maintained primarily by linguistic signification. Everyday life is, above all, life with and by means of the language I share with my fellowmen. An understanding of language is thus essential for any understanding of the reality of everyday life.

They go on to reaffirm that language is an essential aspect of the social construction of reality process. In their discussion of the omnipresent importance of language for the reality we experience in everyday life, Berger and Luckmann (1967:38) state AI encounter language as a facticity external to myself and it is coercive in its effect on me.@

Research into the social psychology of language as well as studies on language and social interaction has evolved over the past several decades among several disciplines including sociology, psychology, English, anthropology, communication, philosophy, and linguistics (Robinson 1998; Wieder 1999).

One way in which language is believed to influence our understanding of social reality

goes back to the ideas of Sapir (1929, 1949) and Whorf (1956). The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis stresses the idea that we view or perceive the world in terms of our own language. More specifically, it maintains that the social reality we experience is unique to our own language; those who speak languages other than our own perceive the world differently, according to their own language. It holds that terms for specific phenomena in languages often do not have precise counterparts in other languages (MacLachlan 1996). While the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is widely taught in introductory sociology courses, there is a need to demonstrate to students how various words within our own language that are used to refer to the same phenomenon often convey very different meanings to people, thus creating very different perceptions of social reality.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has been very controversial among scholars of language (Cameron 1999). According to Cameron (1999:155-156) AWhorf=s big idea both attracts and repels; we are troubled (though also fascinated) by the >strong= hypothesis that radically different language systems could produce incommensurable realities, but equally we resist the universalist suggestion that linguistic differences are merely trivial, superficial or inconsequential.@ In recent years studies have been done that illustrate the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, such as the work on Dutch and Spanish questioning behavior by Ulijn and Verweij (2000). It should be noted that in addition to the disciplines of sociology, psychology, anthropology, and linguistics, language is important to the business profession since businesspeople must carefully choose words in order to influence the attitudes and perceptions of prospective consumers so that they will purchase their products and services (Krohn 1994).

TEACHING LITERATURE

According to Busch (1978), one task of sociologists in introductory courses is to help students understand how knowledge and perceptions are socially constructed. It is important for students of sociology to understand the interactional processes through which various social facts come to be defined and obtain their meaning. Obach (1999), for example, demonstrated the significance of helping students understand that not only racial stereotypes, but race itself, is socially constructed. Beeman (1996) discussed how ethnic slurs and stereotypes that are directed toward members of minority groups can create powerful self-fulfilling prophecies that produce negative consequences for these individuals.

Discussing the power of the sociological imagination (Mills 1959) in helping students understand their social worlds, Brouillette and Turner (1992:276) state that sociology A...can provide them with a way of seeing@ rather than with a body of information to be memorized and regurgitated on examinations.@ To illustrate how deviance is socially constructed, for example, they describe how on the first day of class they have a student deposit saliva on a spoon, and the class attempts to determine whether it is spit@ or saliva.@ It can be either, depending on how it is defined. Language is the mechanism through which people are able to communicate and define situations.

EUPHEMISMS

The manner in which language is used has a profound impact on how we perceive social phenomena (Giles and Wiemann 1993), and nowhere is this more evident than when one considers the use of euphemisms. Describing the origin of the term, Hirschberg (1996:271)

writes *Euphemism* comes from Greek (to speak well of or to use words of good omen). Originally these words were used to placate the gods. Others have suggested that euphemisms are terms that are used in place of words that are offensive. For example, Newman (1995:51) defines a euphemism as "...an inoffensive expression that is substituted for one that may be offensive," and Allan and Burridge (1991:3) describe it as "...expression that seeks to avoid being offensive." Thus, euphemisms are used in order to be polite and as a means to soften the impact of words that might be more offensive. However, in many instances such language is also used to persuade and deliberately mislead (Hirschberg 1996).

It has been pointed out that in the modern world many individuals and organizations seem to be more concerned with winning the argument than telling the truth (Robinson 1993). Describing the prevalence of false information in society, Robinson (1993:360) stated that "Language ...is used to persuade rather than to inform; it may also be used to amuse, to excite, or to keep attention rather than to tell the truth." Euphemisms that are used to mislead or deceive are called *doublespeak* (Lutz 2000). Lutz stated the following regarding the power of language (2000:230,233):

Language is a tool or weapon that can be used by those in power to achieve their ends at the expense of others. ...Doublespeak is language that only pretends to communicate, that makes the bad seem good, the negative appear positive, the unpleasant attractive, or at least tolerable. It is language that avoids, shifts, or denies responsibility, language that conceals or prevents thought. ...It alters our perception of reality. It deprives us of the tools we need to develop, advance, and preserve our society, our culture, our civilization. It delivers us into the

hands of those who do not have our interests at heart.

However, it is also important to note that euphemisms may be used for deceptive purposes by political regimes in order to A...cover up, distort, or frame their actions in a more positive light@ (Newman, 1995:51). For instance, in their analysis of ten war-declaration speeches that announced the outbreak of World War I and World War II in seven countries, Moerk and Pincus (2000) found that national leaders routinely downplayed the suffering of war by using euphemisms. As will be described later in the paper, the military is particularly adept at using words in a crafty manner to present their activities to the public in a favorable light.

To help students understand the significance of language and how it affects our perceptions, I utilize an exercise in my introductory classes that allows students to become critically aware of euphemisms that are commonly used in everyday life and demonstrates to them how such language can shape and color our perceptions of social reality.

PROCEDURE

During a lecture on language and the use of symbols, I begin the exercise by giving the students a definition of euphemisms, and then share a few examples with them so that they have a basic grasp of the concept. For example, I tell them that a euphemism for sweat is Aperspiration,@ and that death is euphemistically referred to as Apassed away.@ A person that is fat is referred to as Aheavy,@ and used cars are called Apreviously owned@ automobiles. I then divide the class into small groups of four to five students, each of which is asked to choose a spokesperson to record their findings and speak on behalf of members of the group at the conclusion of the exercise. This method is particularly well suited for small (20) to medium (50)

sized introductory sociology classes but is not recommended for large classes with more than fifty students, since there will probably not be sufficient time for each group to report their findings to the class. It has been noted that interactive undergraduate education activities such as small group discussions and classroom exercises are useful tools to promote enthusiasm and motivation among students (McKinney and Graham-Buxton 1993; Rau and Heyl 1990; Smith 1996; Woodbury and Aldrich 2000).

Students are asked to brainstorm for 15 to 20 minutes and think of as many words, and the corresponding euphemisms for those words, as possible. Students are asked to discuss amongst themselves why some words are used in place of others by different members of society. At the end of the brainstorming session, I ask the spokesperson of each group to share with the class the words along with the euphemisms for those words that their group was able to conjure up. In a typical 50 minute class session, the first 15 minutes are used to discuss the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the next 15-20 minutes is used for group discussion, and the remaining 15 or so minutes are used to discuss the words and euphemisms that the groups identify.

Each group typically comes up with about 15 to 30 examples of euphemisms in the allotted time period. This activity allows students to critically examine the use of language and facilitates an increased awareness of the role it plays in shaping our perceptions of the world. It demonstrates to them how their perceptions of some phenomenon as either positive or negative are to some degree a result of the particular word that is used to describe it. It also leads to discussion about how language is associated with several important issues, including political correctness, stigmas, and deception. A word of caution is in order before proceeding with this exercise. It is important to keep in mind that students will likely come up with euphemisms for

words that are not only offensive to some groups and/or individuals, but blatantly derogatory, racist, or sexist, so they should be reminded at the outset to be sensitive when using such terms given the diversity of individuals in a classroom setting.

DISCUSSION

Table 1 provides examples of euphemisms provided by students during this exercise. As Table 1 shows, many of the euphemisms students conjure up during this exercise have to do with elements of political correctness that emerged in the 1990s. In this period of political correctness, for example, students described someone who is short as *vertically challenged*. With regard to race, Black is now described as *African American* and Oriental is called *Asian American*. This provides a good point of departure for discussing the social construction of race and how the terms we use for racial categories are socially decided and political and need to be examined in historical context (Zatz and Mann 2002; see also Ferrante and Browne 2001). Macionis (2002:38) suggests asking students to consider the following: *Does the Sapir-Whorf thesis imply that people have the power to change reality by changing their symbols? What happened, for example, when people in the U.S. started using words like African American rather than Negro?*

In regard to prohibitions on the use of sexist language, sewage manholes are now referred to as *maintenance covers*. Indeed, the topic of sexist language provides a good opportunity to discuss language and power relations in society as well and could serve as the starting point for a class on sexism and gender inequality in society, and how words that have been used in the past contributed to the development of a patriarchal culture. The particular words that are used can

be used to control and subjugate members of certain groups in society. Pfohl (1994), for example, notes that women are often referred to as *Achicks@* and *Ababes@* by men. When this occurs, Pfohl (1994:449) claims that they are exercising *Apowerful rituals of linguistic social control.@* Macionis (2002:99) also provides some good examples of language and its power, value and attention functions as it relates to gender.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Some words are stigmatizing, which means that they tend to discredit individuals and pose a barrier to social interaction. For instance, some students said that euphemisms for retard are words like *Aslow@* or *Amentally challenged.@* This provides an excellent opportunity to discuss the concepts of stigma (Goffman 1963) and labeling, and to illustrate how the type of language we use has the potential to stigmatize certain segments of the population. I point out that although *Aslow@* is meant to be an inoffensive expression in this case, people-first language is now used to describe individuals who possess disabilities. Instead of saying that someone who has mental retardation is *Aretarded@* or a *Amental retard@* or *Aslow,@* it is proper to refer to them as a *Aperson with mental retardation@* in order to reduce the stigma associated with the other labels.

Involvement in deviant activities as well as the criminal justice system can be stigmatizing. Euphemisms are frequently employed to describe some of these activities to make them less stigmatizing. For example, strip dancing in clubs and bars is now referred to as *Aexotic dancing@* or *Aadult entertainment,@* while gambling is often called *Agaming.@* Regarding the criminal justice system, I point out that the juvenile court was founded with the intent to rehabilitate children, and also to protect them from the harsh realities of the adult

system, and part of this included a different vocabulary of words that are less stigmatizing to refer to the various court processes for juveniles. For example, juveniles who commit offenses are not arrested, they are taken into custody, they are not convicted but adjudicated delinquent, and instead of being sentenced they receive a disposition.

Many of the euphemisms students come up with have to do with various bodily processes. It is not considered socially acceptable to directly discuss many of these functions, so euphemisms are used in their place since individuals tend to be more comfortable with them. Allan and Burrige (1991:12) claim that social taboos are common in many areas that have to do with bodily effluvia, reproductive processes, and the associated body-parts, and in their book they provide a wealth of examples of euphemisms for such bodily parts and processes.

If students have not mentioned so already, I also discuss some of the euphemisms that are used by the government in times of war. Good examples of terms used to describe wars are provided by Newman (1995:51) and Macionis (1996:88). Civilian casualties are referred to as collateral damage, and the neutron bomb is called a radiation enhancement device. Lutz (2000:231) points out that incontinent ordnance is used to describe bombs that hit civilian targets, while serving the target refers to killing the enemy. Okamura (1982) described how, during World War II, the government confined over 120,000 mostly native born Japanese Americans against their will and euphemistically labeled the event an evacuation and relocation. To borrow a phrase from Macionis, these examples show how the government attempts to spin reality in a light that is favorable to their cause. Other sources that provide a wealth of useful examples of euphemisms include Allan and Burrige (1991) and Grazian (1997).

Finally, I stress the use of euphemisms in corporate America as well as by bureaucrats and workers in the helping professions. When businesses fire or lay off people in order to increase the bottom line, it is euphemistically referred to as Downsizing (Grazian 1998; Stein 1997). Airlines now call barf or vomit bags Motion sickness or Motion discomfort bags. In their discussion of the euphemisms of meddling, Edgley and Brissett (1995:37) provide examples of how social workers meddle in people's lives. Their meddling activities are euphemistically referred to as Professional intervention strategies or Crisis intervention. Instead of tinkering or intruding into people's lives, they Treat or Empower.

STUDENT RESPONSE

The response from students toward this exercise has been positive. The exercise has utility and is well received by students. By allowing them to brainstorm in small groups they are able to discuss the nuances associated with language and see how language can be skillfully used to achieve certain ends. They indicate that it helps them gain an understanding and appreciation of the role language plays in the social construction of reality process in that different words used to describe the same phenomenon can result in the emergence of very different social realities for those involved. It is clear to me that students retain knowledge from this exercise since they frequently point out euphemisms for concepts and issues that arise during subsequent class discussions throughout the semester.

To assess student response to this activity, information was collected from them in qualitative form. Students were asked to write short thought papers about the exercise in which they were to indicate how it helped them understand the power of language and euphemisms to

socially construct reality and to indicate who uses euphemisms and why. Brief excerpts from their papers are provided.

Some of the students, for example, said they didn't know what euphemisms were prior to the exercise.

I was unclear as to what they really were before. But now, I can understand how these words allow us to convey to others our feelings while still being nice and pleasant.

This was a good activity. I never knew that these words were called euphemisms.

Other students said that the activity made them think about how words are selectively used, and helped them to better understand how words shape reality.

Some of the euphemisms that were spoken today I had never heard of some of them.

I better understand what a euphemism is. I also realize that [there are] a lot [of them] too.

It was a fun activity to make one realize how many euphemisms there are and the different ways people think.

[Hearing] what kind of words we use helped me understand what is really [being] said.

It gave me a better understanding of euphemisms because of the comparison, and other

group member=s ideas they expressed.

I had never thought much or realized we used euphemisms so much in society.

I never really knew how much people sugar coated things.

It helped me gain insight from peers. The number and variety of examples was useful.

Some students said they already knew about euphemisms, but that the activity helped them nonetheless.

I was already familiar with most of what we [covered], but I loved it. Its an interesting subject to pursue.

It helped a lot. I knew what euphemisms were, but this activity helped [me] understand how widely used they are.

Students also indicated that while everyone uses euphemisms, powerful individuals such as the government (politicians), military, and wealthy individuals were more likely than others to use euphemisms to mislead and cover up what they were doing as well as to control others, while powerless individuals were more likely to use them to be polite. Comments such as the following were typical.

Powerful people use them to cover up what they are really doing, and powerless people use them to cover up what they are trying to say [to be polite].

Powerful people use euphemisms to throw us off, like we don't know any better.

Powerless people use them to be more polite.

Powerful people tend to use such words to be less offensive. In politics, you can attract more flies with honey than you can with vinegar.

I thought it was an extremely good activity. It helps to show how we actually try to cover up our true feelings....There are those who are able to convince others to do and think whatever they want with the use of the right phrasing of words. A lot of things can be covered up by carefully selecting the wording and it not being picked up.

All types of people use them. From rich to poor, but the government agencies love to use them so they don't have to tell the blatant truth.

The government uses euphemisms to keep us from knowing what is really going on.

Finally, on a philosophical note, one may wonder what would happen if the euphemisms themselves became the normal way of speaking. We would have a society characterized by

even greater political correctness than the one we currently live in and we would probably be more polite. However, it seems to me that we would still have euphemisms for the original euphemisms. That is, new euphemisms would probably emerge to replace the old ones that became the normal way of speaking in such a society.

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Table 1. Words and Euphemisms

<u>Word</u>	<u>Euphemism</u>
blind	visually impaired
short	vertically challenged
old	elderly, chronologically gifted
old person	senior citizen
janitor	custodial engineer
gay, homosexual	alternative lifestyle
poor	underprivileged, low income
sexually active	promiscuous
had sex	made love
retarded	mentally challenged, slow
is hyper	has creative energy
fired	laid off
crazy	mentally ill, disturbed
fat	overweight, obese, healthy, big boned
unemployed wife, housewife	homemaker, domestic engineer
weird	eccentric

lying	stretching the truth
drunk	under the influence, intoxicated
deaf	hearing impaired
stripper	exotic dancer, adult entertainer
prison	correctional facility
used clothing	vintage clothing
Indians	native Americans
rapist	sex offender
handicapped	physically challenged
car cleaner	detailer
diet food	low fat food
garbage men	sanitation workers
dead	deceased
dormitory	residence hall
drug addiction	chemical dependency
unemployed	between jobs
smart kid	gifted child