

Balancing Scales of Language Injustice

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Abstract

This paper addresses the ways in which our everyday usage of the common phrase “people of color” perpetuates a basic inequality in language use. A suggestion to eliminate inequality in teaching is proposed.

Keywords

Race, Racism, Teaching, Inequality

1. Introduction

The role of language in shaping behavior has had a long standing place in Linguistics, specifically, and Social Science, generally (Whorf, 1941). How language, including metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), creates, modifies and amends reality is probably part of the basic teaching in most Social Psychology classes (O'Brien, 2011). They are powerful in shaping and maintaining perceptions of reality as well as shaping thought and behavior. In a recent set of remarkable studies, Chen (2013) found that languages that are futureless in contrast to languages that use references to past, present and future have significant impact on the actions of native speakers. When we say it will rain, we do not mean it is raining now or rained yesterday. When Chinese Speakers say it is raining, that could mean yesterday, today or tomorrow. There is no sense of future built into their language. Lacking such a sense has been profoundly related to such critical behaviors as smoking, savings and number of children.

In this paper we are concerned with the way in which our everyday usage of the common phrase “people of color” perpetuates a basic inequality in language use. Moore (2006) has documented how racism is built into the English language through obvious bigotry, ethnocentrism, and loaded words. He also cites books and movies that depict the English spoken by whites as being superior to that spoke by Asians, Native Americans, and Chicanos. Moore concludes that the recognition of racism in our English spoken language is the first step towards easing the daily oppression of racism while ceasing to use such language would be a second and more critical step in modifying the degradation of people. While words can be clear in depicting reality, they can also disguise and mask reality. “Elite white men” rarely get named in race scholarship (Feagin, 2014). Almost all scholars and analysts,

critical and mainstream, excuse and rescue whites with abstract nouns (“society discriminates against Latinos”) or passive tenses (Black Americans have long been the victims of racial discrimination) (Feagin, 2013). Miller (2007) documents how dominants (White males with power) have developed almost every word used as racial slurs for the “other”. As a way of protesting the power and privilege of dominants, subordinates have fewer slurs they can use to challenge their oppression (*i.e.* redneck, white honkie, cracker).

As educators, we must be aware of how the increasing number of educational endeavors for promoting racial dialogue between diverse students must challenge the dominant racial frame (Leonardo & Porter). In this paper, we examine the everyday, taken for granted, phrases: “People of Color” and “White people” as they shape our understanding of race relations in America.

2. Examining Our Everyday Language

At a personal level, we have examined our everyday usage of the word “guys” and the word “girls”. The first word excludes women and the second word reduces the status and maturity level of college-aged females. We have emphasized in our teaching that our students should change their word usage. Even though all the students in the class know or have experienced women, it is still difficult to change their everyday usage. Changing language on any matter is all but impossible, as words carry frames around them and are firmly linked to perspectives people have long held (Feagin, 2014).

We have become increasingly uncomfortable using the phrases “White People” and “People of Color” in our classes and publications. In using those phrases, we sensed that we were obliterating differences by lumping many different non-white people under the rubric of people of color. While white people were also being lumped, it did not feel as offensive. In part, this was our failure to see that the white paradigm of power and legitimacy made those differences unimportant for understanding racism. Whites seemed to be gaining and did not lose if they insisted upon being called Greek Americans or Italian Americans. Calling people of color African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans or Native Americans seemed to be awkward at best and possibly divisive of the unity that minorities had obtained with the phrase “People of Color”. It wasn’t as if Blacks, Latinos, Asians, Middle Eastern and Native Americans didn’t understand that they were people of color. They understood it very well. We felt that we were adding to their invisibility by painting them all the same with that colorless phrase: “People of Color”.

3. The History of “People of Color”

Although, it is White people who have provided the most common terms for men and women of color, “People of color” is a phrase that was developed by people of color in protest to those terms and in reaction to a dominant white racial frame that was explicitly and implicitly racist. Martin Luther King Jr. (1963) in his famous, “I have a Dream” speech, spoke to the unity of men and women of color when he used the phrase “citizens of color”. We are not suggesting that the phrase of people of color has outlived its unifying purpose. It still serves as a banner to deal with the oppressive white racial frame. But we believe that the continued use of this phrase elevates white people, since white is still seen as a superior and any other color is valued less. The continued use of that phrase perpetuates the dominance and superiority that goes along with being white. How can we rectify this imbalance? How can we use language to overcome the inequities that the current language perpetuates? How can we try to right with language what’s not right in the world? Something is wrong about our language because something is wrong with our world (Personal email communication from Pauline Vinieres, M.A.). While it is probably not realistic to believe that changing language use can be negotiated through academic writing, reflecting upon language usage and examining the frames that surround it can help initiate dialogue. The language changes that we would like to see occurring need to come from a group or a movement working against racism to have any chance of taking place. We also recognize that our effort to change language cannot be done in isolation. Men and women of color as well as white people need to be involved in understanding that the problem with the term “white” is that it is often associated with power and privilege and that the phrase “people of color” has frames of oppression and white racism.

How can we equalize so that there would be more individuality and appreciation for each? How can we balance the phrases? After years of trying to figure this out, we realized that instead of working on appreciating the “People of Color”, we had to deprecate “White People”. After all, we know how the Jews became White; we know how Irish Americans, Italian Americans, Greek Americans, Polish Americans, Turkish Americans, German Americans, all became Americans and in so doing became part of the dominant racial frame. Blacks, Latinos, Mexicans, Natives and Asians were and are denied that opportunity. The subordinates fought their marginalization

and invisibility by insisting on being African Americans, Latino American, Mexican Americans, Native Americans and Asian Americans.

4. Conclusion

What can be done to address these linguistic imbalances? Our first thought was to do to white people what we now do to people of color; in the latter group, we lump them with the phrase, “people of color”. Lumping is a way that the dominant cultures and dominants can include “all those people”. If we are going to lump all men and women of color, let’s do this to all men and women who are white. We thought the phrase “People without color” would address the linguistic imbalance that perpetuates subordinate, inferiority, superiority, power and privilege and overall hierarchical differences. However, aside from the objections many whites would have to being described and lumped as “People without color”, it would be treating whites as they have treated blacks. Retaliation and reducing the other are not effective means for gaining understanding of how language shapes our understanding. It is a symbolic attack on the comfort of whites. Whites often enter into racial dialogue with an insistence upon a safe environment. This demand works against the possibilities of examining the oppression that they participate in (Thompson, 2003; Leonardo & Porter, 2010). We are not insisting on being hostile, but on acknowledging that addressing the white racial frame of dominance will be uncomfortable for all who benefit. We do not want to call whites oppressors since many whites work to disarm their unearned privilege and cannot step out of their whiteness any more than non-whites can step out of their color. Showing how well meaning whites all benefit from dominant racial frame that oppresses should be one of the goals of racial dialogue. Just as there is nothing pedagogically wrong with using the term “White Oppressors” there is nothing wrong with the phrase “People without Color” as a way of raising awareness, increasing understanding, and reducing the power and oppression of the white racial frame.

We do not have a proposal for the use of different language, which might work to equalize the phrases. Lacking a solution should not exclude racial dialogue. We believe that progress and understanding in race relations can occur when there is an acceptance and acknowledgement of unearned privilege that whites have and there is an acceptance and understanding of the white racial frame that dominates race relations in America and that language is only one of the ways in which this domination occurs.

In sum, there may not be a linguistic solution to the imbalance in phrases that are used currently to examine race relations in America, but there is much to be gained through an examination and analysis of those phrases. In our classes, we plan to use the phrase “People without color”.

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