Troublesome Words

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Words have histories, and history affects meaning. And since the history of the English language is very much bound up with the history of the English Empire, many ordinary words have histories that are subtly, or even covertly, racist, imperialist, or otherwise troublesome. I recently received a letter from a colleague, taking me to task for using the word *tribalism* in an article. He wrote:

> "In your essay you make a pejorative reference to *tribalism*, and I noticed a similar, uncritical repetition of Orwell's reference to linguistic *barbarism* in your essay on anarchism and language. These are highly orientalist and colonial tropes . . . repeatedly invoked throughout Western history and philosophy to justify extreme dispossession and violence."

He's right about *tribalism*, of course. And I really should have known better, though the fault here is one of carelessness rather than malice. I'm less sure about *barbarism*, for reasons that I'll explain shortly.

The exchange got me to thinking, though, about troublesome words.

By troublesome, I do not mean simply bad. Bad words are intended to offend or provoke, and they convey that intention as part of their meaning; they rely on it for their force. There are no innocent uses of *fuck* or *cunt* or *nigger*. Competent speakers can be presumed to know what they are doing when they use such terms, though whether it is right to use them must remain a separate question. And then there's the further puzzle of whether they can be reclaimed or normalized. If *fuck* ever starts to sound polite it will, for precisely that reason, become as quaint and as rare as *zounds* (which once blasphemously referred to "God's wounds"). And the question of whether *queer* is a term of empowerment or abuse is as much generational as political. But the point remains: Bad words may be used well, but to use them well one must realize that they are bad words.

Troublesome words are not bad in the same sense; one might say instead that they are mischievous. They don't behave how we would like.

Troublesome words are those words that have a racist or sexist origin, connotation, or implication — whether obvious or obscure — but which also capture some useful meaning, and for which we do not have ready alternatives.

In addition to *tribalism* and *barbarism*, which have already been mentioned, I could add (just off the top of my head) — *hysteria*, *cannibal*, *denigrate*, *philistine*, and *juggernaut*.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*: *Hysteria* began as a medical term describing a psychological condition thought to be caused by a disorder of the uterus, and "usually attended with emotional disturbances and enfeeblement or perversion of the moral and intellectual faculties." *Cannibal* was a variation on *Carib*, the people for whom the Caribbean is named. *Denigrate* means, literally, "to blacken." The Philistines were an ancient people who regularly came into conflict with the Israelites (most famously in the story of David and Goliath); since the nineteenth century the word has been used to refer to anti-intellectual opponents of high culture, though it can also mean, simply, an enemy. *Juggernaut* is a corruption of the Sanskrit *Jagannātha* ("lord of the world"), a title belonging to Krishna; the more familiar meaning derives from an annual festival in which his statue is pulled through the streets on an enormous conveyance, the wheels of which were reported (by

Europeans) to crush the god's worshippers.

In addition to the etymological and historical concerns, there are words that are troublesome for reasons of connotation, or because they are often used in some biased fashion. For example, I was once upbraided for using the word *riot* in a lecture, the objection being that *riot* is the way the authorities describe uprisings in order to discredit them. I responded by explaining that an uprising can be almost anything — a strike, a sit-in, the Zapatista's insurrection, a military mutiny, or Gandhi's march to the sea — whereas what I was talking about was, specifically, groups of people acting together in defiance of the law, attacking property and fighting with cops. Also, for what it's worth, I was pretty clearly on the side of the rioters.

I have likewise been told that *strident*, *perky*, and *obsessive* are misogynist terms. All are harmless in themselves, but (it is argued) they are disproportionately and dismissively applied to women; and as a result, even when they're used to describe men, the implication is that they are insulting *because* they are feminizing. A similar complaint has recently become a campaign targeting the word *bossy*, the reason being that we call little girls *bossy* when we would call little boys *leaders*. Oddly, the campaign went public with an editorial in the *Wall Street Journal*, a publication that is famously and purposely pro-boss. One class-conscious commenter has suggested that the problem isn't the word but the behavior: it isn't wrong that we object when girls (and women) are domineering, but that we don't object nearly often enough when men (and boys) are. He also pointed out that when we do object to bossy men, the words we use are considerably worse; we call them *jerks* and *assholes*. So in the interest of equality, perhaps we need to give men and boys less slack, but also be more willing to call women and girls *assholes*.

Then again, a friend of mine once quipped: "As a queer man, I've never had any complaints about assholes." So maybe *asshole*, as a term of abuse, is homophobic.

Writing is full of such quandaries, in part because English is littered with troublesome words. Probably we will never scrub our language clean of them, since they generally pass us by unnoticed and, when we do notice, we find it difficult to do without them. Such words are troublesome precisely because they sometimes are the words that we need. We struggle to find replacements — *mania* for *hysteria*, *decry* for *denigrate* — but we always seem to lose something in the bargain. The substitution is clumsy, imprecise, or hollow. Will *factionalism* do as a surrogate for *tribalism*? Usually, I suppose; but not always. And when the substitution falters, where no synonym is available, a writer faces a terrible choice: Say something more than one means, or say much less.

The issue here is not merely that such words might give offense. It is not even, really, that the bias in the language reflects some real (if often latent) prejudice in the person who uses the language. The problem is that the words we use carry with them some conceptual framing, a way of dividing up and understanding the world. All words do that — it is how they create meaning — and words often do it at many levels simultaneously. That's not necessarily bad. It produce a kind of literary richness, ambiguity, irony, humor, or a subversive subtext. The thing that makes some words troublesome is that they carry along with them a conceptualization that we cannot endorse, and which may be contrary to our purposes in writing. The best word may also sometimes be the wrong word to use.

As a practical matter, the first question to ask should be whether the word really does express one's meaning. Then, is it liable to be misunderstood? And finally, is it really likely to offend people? Implicit in each of these is the question of whether the troublesome meaning — the unintended implication — lays dormant, as an archaism, or whether it is an active feature of the word's functioning, part of the conceptual work that it does. After all, who today considers *slave* an insult to Slavs?

I think *barbarism* passes this test, though *tribalism* fails. (And if we do away with *barbarism*, must we also avoid *vandalism*? What about *goth*?)

But things are never quite so easy. Unfortunately, the question of whether a word may give offense or be misunderstood is always empirical; it has no obvious relationship to the separate question of whether it should offend or confuse. For instance: I've heard it argued that *picnic* is linguistically implicated in lynching, though in fact, it comes from the French, *pique-nique,* which originally meant something like a potluck. In contrast, and somewhat strangely, I have never heard anyone object to *denigrate,* though it shares the *nig* root with *nigger.* However, the etymologically innocent *niggardly* — meaning stingy, likely derived from an early Scandinavian word — always raises an eyebrow and sometimes erupts in controversy.

Most famously, in 1999, David Howard was forced to resign from his position as aide to the mayor of Washington, D.C. because he used the word *niggardly* to describe the District's budget. The misunderstanding was predicable since, as the linguist Geoffrey Nunberg put it, "Phonetics always trumps etymology." It was also somewhat ironic: The point Howard was trying to make was that the city's (mostly black) residents were being scandalously starved of government services. Instead, he came across as a bigot and lost his job — which only produced a counter-controversy, leading to an apology from the mayor and a new job with his staff. Pretty much everybody ended up looking foolish, and public services in the nation's capital did not improve one bit.

There is a lesson in that, for speakers and audiences alike. The words we use are important, but what we are trying to say is at least as important. Speakers and writers should do other utmost to select the words that convey their meaning; but readers and audiences should also listen for the intention and try to grasp the idea behind our always imperfect language. If both parties work at it, communication is just sometimes miraculously possible. But if we don't — if we pay too little attention, or too much — words don't just fail us, they betray us. The language we use and the way that we use it — the way we write and speak, the way we read and listen — can divide as well as connect, can obscure rather than illuminate, and can defeat our own efforts.

Troublesome words are only a particularly clear example of a much deeper problem. Language, though rule-governed, is inherently unruly. At its best its anarchic nature produces outbursts of creativity — not just new manners of speech, but sometimes also new ideas and clearer ways of thinking. At its worst, it is something beyond meaningless; it can be actively destructive of meaning, preventing communication, and therefore also limiting thought.

Words are tools; but, like knives or dynamite, they are dangerous tools. And we are, all of us — writers and readers — always somewhere in the process of learning how to use them.

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