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The Destruction of Language as Tool of Power

BY  THOMAS HARRINGTON JUNE 5, 2023 PHILOSOPHY, SOCIETY 10 MINUTE READ

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Do you ever think about the beliefs or mental images your mind generated about certain words as a child, before you had the contextual information necessary to understand the particular value they had for the adults you heard using them?

I do.

For example, I remember a long ago Easter dinner with family, my uncle, my aunt, and my grandparents and how, after quickly finishing my dessert, I climbed under the long table “unseen” (wink, wink) determined to stealthily untie the shoes of the adults as they continued carrying on about the state of the world. At one point during my visit to that mysterious sub-tabular world conversation above turned for some reason to the goings-on in Turkey and Greece.

While my still pre-literate self could sense from the context that they were talking about faraway places, all I could think about and see in my mind was the turkey we had just eaten, and the “grease” I had seen at the bottom of the basting pan before my mom had used it to make the gravy.

For several years after that those silly images of turkey (the edible bird) and grease (the thing that comes from that bird when cooked) popped up every time I read about, or heard someone mention, those two countries. In time, they faded away and were replaced in my mind with a picture of the two states on the map and with assorted historical and cultural images that I had come, rightly or wrongly, to associate with those places.

What I have described above is a natural process with most people when it comes to elements of language that represent things or concepts that are not present in our immediate physical environment, a class of phenomena that includes a high percentage of the content we learn about in formal educational settings.

A good instructor can provide us with a rudimentary rendering of the correspondence between a given linguistic term and the reality it is said to represent. More often than not, however, we are thrown back on the practice of making educated guesses regarding the symbol-reality relationships in our world.

Through this latter process of trial and error most people eventually acquire the ability to successfully “name” most of the things with which they come into contact during the course of their domestic and working lives.

And many, if not most, people are, it seems, content to leave their reflections about the nature of the relationship between words and the symbols we use to describe it right there.

Many others, however, are not. These word lovers are aware, explicitly or implicitly, of what Saussure described as the fundamentally *arbitrary nature* of the relationship between the linguistic sign and the thing it seeks to represent, and hence the largely *context-bound nature* of verbal meaning, and are thus constantly trying to understand a given word’s multiple connotations.

Though not often stated directly in this way, teaching people to perceive the multivalent nature of language, and the way it can change according to the context in which it is employed, has always been one of the key goals of a humanistic education.

Why study poetry, for example, if not to hone the ability to understand, and perhaps more importantly to seek the meaning of, realities that are located beyond the most obvious,

information-transmitting, levels of discourse?

When we seek meanings that may lie beyond those observed in our first naïve reading of a poem or other piece of literature, we are effectively using our acquired storehouse of cultural knowledge and our constructive imaginations to “fill in” the suggested, but not explicit, context needed to make “full sense” (if such a thing exists) of the text.

Can doing this sometimes lead to academic wild goose chases and speculative dead-ends? No doubt.

But not doing so, and not teaching the young to do so, is far more dangerous.

And that is for a very simple reason.

Any attempt to understand the world in a way that honors its unfathomable complexity must be based on the assumption that there are always many initially invisible, or only partially evident pathways of interconnectedness that imbue the realities in our midst with power and meaning.

This is true most obviously when it comes to trying to understand the vastness of nature. And though many seem loath to admit it, it is also true when it comes to the task of comprehending the means through which centers of social power have regularly engineered cultural “facts” for the rest of us throughout history.

Put in slightly different terms, theorization or speculation based on partial inputs (subsequently subjected, of course, to a series of verifying tests) is the unavoidable first step in the process of turning the copious mounds of undigested information all around us into knowledge.

And yet, everywhere I look just the opposite is being done and encouraged.

We are being told that words bereft of any clear or comprehensible set of situating referents have stable and unchanging meanings, and more absurdly still, that if another word with a completely distinct semantic history *reminds someone in some way of* another supposedly monosemic word or term, all others must accede to the “reality” of that personally construed definition, regardless of the broadly accepted parameters of its current use!

We saw a classic example of the first practice, as I explain [in my new book](#), with the use of the term “cases” during the most hysteria-laden part of the pandemic.

Did anyone provide you with a stable and dependable ratio between the growth of so-called cases and hospitalizations and deaths? No they did not, because such calculations either did not exist or if they existed were not made public.

Were you told that prior to the Spring of 2020 the term “case” had never been used to refer to people having a positive test result in the absence of physical symptoms as observed by a doctor? Or that the PCR tests being used were being run at 40-45 cycles of amplification when it was known that anything more than 33 cycles (some experts even said 27 cycles) of amplification generated massive amounts of false positives?

No, you were simply supposed to “consume” the floating signifier of the “case” and accept the fright-freighted single semantic valence that the media was attaching to it by means of nauseating repetition.

And here’s the scary part, most people did exactly that!

I remember explaining much of the foregoing to a lawyer friend of mine back in March of 2020. You’d think that someone who works all day parsing the quality of arguments by others and generating convincing ones of his own would have instantly understood the inherent flimsiness of the term “case” as it was then being used. Nope. He stared back at me blankly. He had no idea of what I was talking about, and without providing a counter-argument repeated his belief in the key importance of case counts.

More frightening still is the second tendency mentioned which involves adult and putatively educated people to engaging in semantic free association of the type I engaged in as a four-year-old at that long ago Easter dinner, and demanding that their wholly personal and usually pejorative “understandings” of a word or speech act be not only granted broad legitimacy in the public square, but that they also serve as a basis for morally sanctioning the person who wrote or uttered them.

Perhaps the most ridiculous and pathetic example of this last phenomenon are serial attempts to punish people for using the word niggardly—which has no known etymological relation to color or race and hence the now-banned derogatory term for African-Americans—in public.

It’s easy to laugh at the ridiculous attempts to place that particular word on public trial. And while it is true that when push came to shove in most cases where this occurred the people involved with adjudicating the matter generally acted sensibly, we still can’t rest easy.

That's because the logics, such as they are, of these tendencies toward aggressive semantic flattening and the radical and self-interested decontextualization of long-understood words and visual signs are very much present in what passes for our public discourses.

Think of the fact that the musician Roger Waters, an avowed anti-Nazi whose father died fighting them in World War II is now being investigated by the German government for performing a vignette that he has done on stage for 40 years in which he dons Nazi-like garb and in high dudgeon reminds his audience of the horrendous cruelty done in the name of that political movement.

Did anyone bother to ask Roger Waters whether his intention was to glorify Nazism? Or to ask the thousands if not millions of people who have watched this act over the years as to whether they felt they were party to a Nazi glorification ritual or, conversely, a searing critique of that ideology? Or look at the easily accessible contextual information makes clear that Waters' little act is, and has always been, the latter of these two things.

But apparently the present German government can't be bothered with all these interpretive "complications." Jumping on the great Monosemic Express, it has decided that history and context is irrelevant, and that a mention or offhand nod to anything Nazi, even to mock it or harshly criticize it, is *per se* bad and unacceptable.

And worse yet, it seems to have the sadly warranted confidence that it can convince a good part of the population to accept this new ludicrously simplified and decontextualized version of the phenomenon in question.

This is precisely what was done throughout the so-called pandemic.

Does questioning the need for the mRNA vaccines, or their safety profile really make you someone implacably opposed to all vaccines? Does knowing and saying on the basis of your own careful investigations that the CDC and FDA are, by dint of their ties to Big Pharma, incapable of providing the citizenry with anything close to patient-centered advice, and that therefore "recommendations" from them should be taken with several teaspoons of salt, really make you an enemy or hater of science?

Does deciding not to take a vaccine because you had natural immunity and, having read the FDA briefing reports on the vaccines when they were rolled out, knew they were never tested for their ability to stop transmission, really mean you were a sort of sociopath, unconcerned with the lives of your fellow citizens?

The obvious answer to all these queries “Of course not!” But this was what we were loudly told, again, and again, and again.

In some ways, this is just business as usual. The powerful have always used their overweening control of the means of cultural production to delimit and simplify the broad public’s access to a given sign, word or concept’s full spectrum of semantic and/or interpretive possibilities.

What does seem to be new, at least in the context of the modern era in which we are still said to live, is the incredible passivity of our credentialed elites before these efforts.

This, in turn, speaks to the dramatic failure of our ever more mechanistically inclined institutions of learning.

If we are to break this demoralizing downward cycle toward the production and bland acceptance of aggressive literalisms in our culture, we must make more space in this era of screens and that oxymoron called “supervised play” for the type of inventive enchantment with language that I experienced under that Easter table long ago.

And that means giving children time to play with words, and perhaps more importantly, hear them from a wide variety of voices in person, and in concert with the miraculous and highly individuated communicative capabilities that each speaker’s face and body add to the communicative process.

It is only after a child gains a consciousness of the wondrous plasticity and multi-valent nature of this human chorus around him, and begins the wonderful ego-driven process of inventing word associations (however “creative” and incorrect they might at first be) of his own that we should begin ever so lightly to instruct him in the “correct” definitions of things.

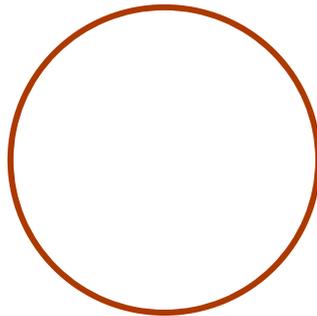
To intervene earlier or more strongly in the name of correctness, out of perhaps a desire to make him excel on meaningless and often essentializing tests given at too early an age, is to risk of stamping out the personalized sense of linguistic wonder, inventiveness and power he will need to stand up to the army of semantic simplifiers arrayed all around him.

It’s currently very fashionable in certain circles to talk about emotional resilience. What no one seems to talk about is cognitive or intellectual resilience, and how under the pressure of the semantic literalists it is being torn to pieces before our eyes.

Language is a wonderful and amazingly complex tool that, if properly honed, allows for the perception and expression of nuanced understandings of the world, and from there, the imaginative creation of new hopes and possibilities.

Isn't it time that we begin to once again model for ourselves, and most importantly, our young, this essential truth?

Author



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