

Language matters: the power of words

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Language matters: The power of words

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The presentation version of this paper was the first in a series of talks in the panel “Language Matters” at the 2015 conference of the Substance Abuse Librarians and Information Specialists in San Diego California. Born and raised in Hungary, a country plagued with alcoholism, mental illness, and suicide, and with a doctorate in linguistics – a unique combination of background and credentials – the author had the privilege to introduce the topic and set the tone for a panel looking at language matters related to addiction science from many angles.

Keywords

Language, Terminology, Linguistics, Addiction science

There are many urban legends related to language. “Gloomy Sunday,” the so-called Hungarian Suicide Song, has gained a reputation for being extremely dangerous for people with depression. Composed by Hungarian pianist and composer [Rezső Seress](#) in 1933, with poet László Jávör adding the lyrics about wanting to commit suicide, this song caused the death of many, including its own composer, Seress. He committed suicide in Budapest in January 1968. Although he survived his first attempt (jumping out of a window), Seress later choked himself to death with a wire in the hospital. Covered by Billie Holiday, Ray Charles, Elvis Costello, Sinead O’Connor, Sarah McLahlan, and Sarah Brightman, the song has become widely known in various subcultures. According to an urban legend, a number of people have committed suicide after listening to this song, regardless of the version or language: Gloomy

Sunday - Domingo Triste - Sombre Dimanche – Einsamer Sonntag – Bela nedelja - ראשון יום - העצור - грустное воскресенье – Szomorú vasárnap. Various version of the song carry a disclaimer: *If you are depressed or feeling gloomy, you should not listen to this song / watch this video.* An example on YouTube is the recording of composer Rezső Seress singing:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8vncAr6BSRE>.

Words seem to have a magic power and have been used by writers and laymen as well as in therapy. A recently departed author, Szilárd Borbély (1963-2014), was one of the many talented Hungarian writers who made an attempt to use words as therapy, an attempt in which he failed. His final novel, *The Dispossessed* (2013; US edition expected in 2016 from HarperCollins), “reveals the destructive power of linguistic

powerlessness, of keeping silent at all costs” (Eller, 2015).

Language use related to addiction

Users of a language express elaborate concepts with lexical units, which then get loaded with content, context, and even bias. For new concepts, new words are coined, whether the need is real or perceived. Recent examples include the words of the year according to the Oxford English Dictionary, “selfie” (2013) and “vape” (2014). Many of the forcefully created terms are doomed to attrition after their origin becomes defunct or obsolete, such as the popular term “Stakhanovite” in the 1930s in the Soviet Union, which referred to an extremely productive worker. Perceived needs for a new term often result in the formation of buzzwords, such as “ideate,” meaning “come up with ideas.”

Content is often misleading without a more specific background. A well-known example is the story of a Hungarian poet who was expelled from university for a poem he published in 1925. According to the administration, someone with homicidal and suicidal thoughts publicly expressed could not be allowed to receive a teacher’s degree.

*Ain't no daddy, ain't no mom,
Ain't no country, ain't no God,
Ain't no crib, or ain't no lover,
Ain't no kisses, ain't no cover.
Attila József: With pure heart (1925)*

Reading out loud the first few lines of the text will immediately illustrate how it plays with rhythm and meter. The poem uses a children’s rhyme, as the poet experiments with the clash of content and form – judging by the university’s reaction, perhaps too daringly for his time.

The second quote from the same poet presents a few lines displayed in every classroom in Hungarian grade schools during the Communist era. It reads

Your work should be precise, aiming high,
As the stars move along in the sky,
The way it's only worth it.

Little did the students know that the first two lines of the poem were missing. Ellipsis is the omission of one or more words that are obviously understood but that must be supplied to make a construction grammatically (or here, semantically) complete. Although its use is rather rare at the beginning of a sentence, in this case it completely changes the meaning.

*Don't you rush it,
Although others will profit,
Your work should be precise, aiming high,
As the stars move along in the sky,
The way it's only worth it.*

To this effect, the witness testimony text incorporates the words “the whole truth,” and that is how witnessed swear in at court:

*“You do solemnly state that the testimony you may give in the cause now pending before this court shall be the truth, **the whole truth**, and nothing but the truth, so help you God.”*

CRAWLING is acceptable.
PUKING is acceptable.
TEARS are acceptable.
PAIN is acceptable.
QUITTING IS
UNACCEPTABLE.

Figure 1 A motivating fitness quote

A perfectly motivating fitness quote (Figure 1), can become not only an insult, but even a target of a lawsuit, if the context is altered – for example, by adding a background image, such as the lady and the bottle in Figure 2.

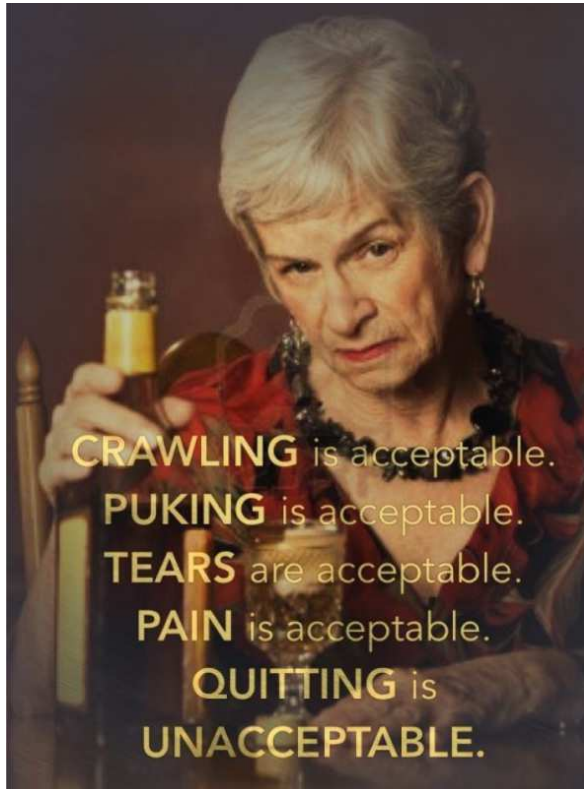


Figure 2 A motivating fitness quote – with an image in the background

Semantic change occurs when a word acquires a new meaning radically different from the original. Types of semantic change include euphemism, retronyms, bowdlerism, mumpsimus, and neologisms, among others.

Euphemism is a widely used strategy for various reasons. Doubletalk is present in the language more than we expect. Reading between the lines has become second nature in certain cultures, which prompts users of particular languages to always look for hidden meanings, unexpressed content, and real intentions. An example for euphemism from the mental health field is the progression of combat-related conditions over time. Expression can be widened and sanitized, such as in the movement from

“shell shock” in World War I to “operational exhaustion” Korean War, and “PTSD” in the Post-Vietnam War era.

Retronyms are created in the language as new names for an old meaning to differentiate from a new meaning recently acquired. A watch used to be simply called a watch until digital watches appeared, creating a need to distinguish between an *analog* watch and a digital watch. The same is happening now with cigarettes, with *tobacco* cigarette used for traditional cigarettes as opposed to electronic cigarettes. For librarians and information specialists, the subsequent effect on controlled vocabularies in databases is not negligible.

Bowdlerism, stemming from Thomas Bowdler’s nineteenth-century censored edition of Shakespeare, is a way of censoring cursing, religious, explicit, or political content, which seems to be happening these days with tobacco. Cigarettes have been airbrushed from old photos of Winston Churchill and Paul McCartney and even cartoons such as Tom & Jerry as a means of presenting a better example.

Mumpsimus is a certain obstinate misuse of words and expression, referring to language use that has been shown to be unreasonable or incorrect. It goes back to a priest used the nonsense word mumpsimus (instead of Latin sumpsimus) in the Mass. Even when told it was incorrect, he insisted that he had been saying it for 40 years and wouldn’t change it. The expression is “quod in ore sumpsimus” (‘which we have taken into the mouth’). Earliest documented use: 1530. The most famous mumpsimus in addiction history is E. M. Jellinek’s nickname, “BUNKY,” which does not (despite claims to the contrary) mean “little radish” in Hungarian.

Neologisms are new words and phrases which emerge as a direct response to a need to refer to new concepts. Marijuana terminology seems to respond quickly to the environmental changes. There is an obvious need for a noun for the marijuana itself, as well as for the ways of growing, storing, distributing, obtaining, smoking, inhaling, sharing, etc., the various equipment used,

amounts, sizes, and mixtures, quality of the marijuana, and the condition of the person using it. The phrases can be global or local, even borrowed from other languages.

Creating new words

- **Compounding:** senior moment, cotton mouth, green out, hog leg
- **Blending:** brunch, infomercial, globesity, budtender, e-vape
- **Acronyms:** DUI, DWY, QP, KGB, OJ
- **Proper nouns:** to bogart something, Alice B. Toklas, Aunt Mary, Angola (marijuana), Buddha, Jim Jones Juanita (marijuana), Mary Jane, Tea Party, Sam
- **Borrowing from other languages:** hookah (India), kief (Middle East), ganja (Jamaica), mota, reefer, El Diablo or El Gallo, Pakaloco frios (S. America), kabak (Turkish marijuana),
- **Creative cannibalization** of the language: Frankenfood, Watergate, **Bridge-gate** in NJ, shotgunning, kick stick, macaroni and cheese

Figure 3: Creating new words

There are many ways the language will allow for new contents as the need arises, such as compounding or blending two previously existing words, abbreviating lengthy expressions in acronyms, shifting the use of proper nouns for common use, borrowing from other languages, and including a variety of creative cannibalization of the language (Figure 3).

Numbers

420

UNITS OF MEASUREMENT

- **Quantities**
matchbox, half or HO, CAN, Cad, lid, Wizard of OZ, QP, brick, OJ, bowl
- **\$\$ amounts of worth**
nickel bag or abe (\$5), dews (\$10), dub (\$20), quarter (\$25), dollar (\$100), G (\$1000)
- **Mixtures**
Twenty and Forty \$20 bag marijuana and a 40-ounce bottle of malt liquor

Figure 4 Use of numbers in addiction terminology

Numbers have a special use in addiction terminology. In addition to the famous 420 (i.e., April 20), a counterculture holiday in North America where people gather to celebrate and consume cannabis, the

doubletalk and secret handshake milieu of drugs includes a lot of units of measurement, as they are used daily. They can refer to measurable quantities, dollar amount equivalents, or a combination, corresponding to the needs of speakers (Figure 4).

Related to alcohol, another controversial term, “the standard drink,” demonstrates what a lack of definitive terminology can do: across different fields of science, the legal system, and other areas of society, a standard drink is defined quite differently. Based on the various definitions, a standard drink might mean very different amounts across cultures and groups. Figure 5 shows the NIDA definition in the United States, also promoted by the Dietary Guidelines to Americans (2010 Dietary Guidelines).

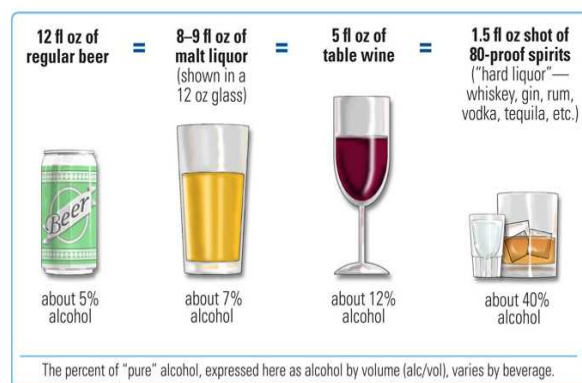


Figure 5: Standard drink

Figure 6 indicates the differences in the interpretation by countries as defined by their governments based on grams of ethanol (ICAP Reports, 1998).

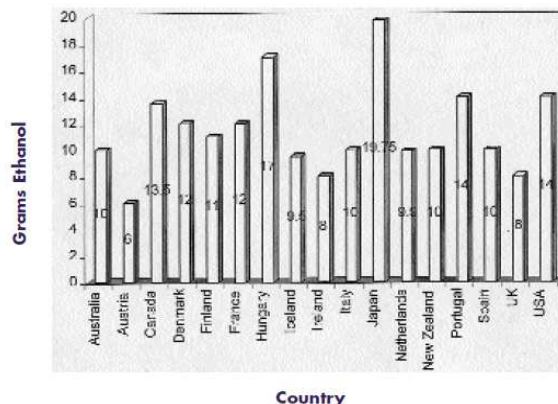


Figure 6 International interpretations of the Standard Drink

With its examples collected from addiction topics, this brief review on some general developments in our language serves merely as a foreword into the next three papers. As the field has been evolving, gradual changes in the language indicate a slow but steady shift in terminology in response to various needs. These needs indicate the efforts to promote a more standardized use of terminology and to reduce stigma with the help of language. Journal policies and publication guidelines

have been traditionally valuable, as proven by the scientific literature and the publishing industry. Also discussed is a more official way to establish constructive language use by means of a classification and diagnostic tool called the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), published by the American Psychiatric Association, listing criteria to describe and categorize behavioral disorders.

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