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Is Our Common Language Deteriorating?

By Steve Bakke  March 20, 2020



As some readers may have noticed, I've focused recently on the value of accurate information, stated with clarity. I've expressed concern that press reports, especially headlines, don't always reflect facts or the message presented in the text. Good decisions will occur only as a result of accurate and balanced information. This applies to decisions on policies dealing with the environment, healthcare, the economy, and beyond.

My concern in this commentary is what I see as the deterioration of our common language, and its impact on decision-making. I readily admit my observations come to you after passing through my conservative filter. And while some of the confusion I refer to emanates from both ends of the political spectrum, many examples I'm concerned with can be traced to the "far left."

Wise decisions demand that we have ethical individuals, using a common language, to present factual information. Too many solutions have become "just a matter of opinion" because one or both antagonists in a debate can't, won't, or don't bother to provide the accurate facts necessary to make progress on a solution. Lack of clarity and a deteriorating common language feed this unhelpful situation.

Another way this deterioration of language can be harmful is when it cheapens language that previously conveyed important perspective. As an example, very often we hear the far left compare some federal agencies or actions to Nazi stormtroopers. This minimizes the real events of the holocaust, just like holocaust denial does.

I see hatred and racism as two words that not only have changed in meaning, but their evolution has resulted in expressions that have little meaning at all. Rather than conveying important opinions and emotions, these and similar expressions have become no more significant than an old fashioned "cuss" word. So how are we to interpret these words or accusations when we hear them coming from the left? Perhaps all we can do is to be aware of them.

Disagreement is the universal trigger for all sorts of language deterioration. If members of the far left disagree with you, expect charges of intolerance, hatred, racism, sexism, lying, or worse. Focusing on just the crime of "lying," if one truly makes a factual but honest mistake,

repeats someone else's mistake, or merely exaggerates, is that a lie? It's common today for someone making an unintended factual mistake to be labeled as a liar, and for this example, political affiliation seems to have little bearing.

Let's look at the concept of "tolerance." At one time we had a good idea of what was meant by tolerance. It was a feeling about a person, group, organization, opinion, policy, etc. Being tolerant meant one would not take a stand in opposition. Tolerance was true acceptance, but not necessarily agreement or approval. By contrast, tolerance in the eyes of the left now requires not only acceptance but also agreement, approval, and vocal endorsement. Friendly folks who formerly qualified as tolerant are now labeled by the left as "intolerant." Perhaps the left realized the absurdity of this evolved label, so they decided to change it to "phobic."

There are many other words or phrases that I've noted as contributing to this communication crisis. Consider these examples: white supremacy, bigotry, hypocrisy, traitor, citizenship, rule of law, due process, freedom, abuse of power, and many more. Recent events demonstrate that these references engender a wide range of interpretations. There is little standard agreement as to the meaning of these words and phrases, and political affiliation is an accurate predictor of how one understands its meaning.

Taking language evolution one step further, the left needed a comment or label when nothing else had yet been conjured up. They wanted a way to explain the hidden meaning behind evil conservative commentary. Thus arose the term "dog-whistle," as in "That's a dog-whistle for (fill in the blank with an evil conservative motive)." They've got all the bases covered.

I'll conclude with an exclamatory example. Who could have predicted that our language deterioration would spawn a new field of political science? It's called "gender politics." We're actually starting to debate what it means when someone proclaims, "I am a woman," or "I am a man."