

Language and objectivity

Words are potent weapons for all causes, good or bad.

(Manly P. Hall)

If you choose a sensitive subject for your talk, you should be aware of the importance of language and objectivity. In other words, the way in which you refer to someone or something indicates a certain perspective that you hold. Two common terms, for example, that indicate a speaker's viewpoint are *terrorist* and *freedom fighter*. It can also be argued that some people formerly considered by many as terrorists are subsequently described as freedom fighters. Nelson Mandela is one such example. The choice the speaker makes clearly depends on his/her political outlook which may also be affected by personal circumstances and events.

Nonetheless, although the term *freedom fighter* tends to be understood more sympathetically, the Ulster Freedom Fighters active in Northern Ireland during the Northern Ireland conflict which began in the late 1960s were actually an outlawed wing of the Ulster Defence Association. Furthermore, the Provisional Irish Republican Army was in fact a paramilitary organisation, proscribed by the British government and not an officially recognised army. Yet the word 'army' tends to lend an air of legitimacy. In addition, the IRA's declared preference for its members was *soldier*, *freedom fighter* or *volunteer*.

Recently strong debate has focused on the names ISIS, IS and Daesh. One argument against IS, for example, is that by using it the speaker/writer is acknowledging the existence, legitimacy and respectability of an Islamic 'State' which de facto does not exist. In an article for the Dundee Courier, the British MP Alex Salmond recently wrote:

We should start by understanding that in a propaganda war language is crucial. [...] The real point of using Daesh is that it separates the terrorists from the religion they claim to represent and from the false dream of a new caliphate that they claim to pursue.

The BBC has also received criticism for using the term 'militants' to describe the perpetrators of the 13th November Paris attacks.

Further controversy followed a speech by the French President Hollande on 31st March 2016 in Washington DC where he used the term 'Islamist terrorism', something which is not acceptable for the American administration which prefers 'violent extremism'. The official White House video of the speech posted online appeared to go mute just when he pronounced these words. The anomaly, spotted by the Media Research Center, a media watchdog which monitors news for bias, was later explained as a technical issue by White House staff and rectified.

Another sensitive sphere regards migration with many terms that indicate clear bias. *Asylum seekers*, *refugees*, *illegal immigrants* and *economic migrants* are some examples.

In conclusion, it must be remembered that certain names, phrases and expressions are not interchangeable. By using them the speaker/writer is signaling political or ideological perspectives to the audience. Unless otherwise indicated, it will be presumed that the speaker/writer shares these perspectives.

Further Reading

<http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/mar/13/white-people-expats-immigrants-migration>

<http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-34061097>

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11713610/The-BBC-is-worried-about-upsetting-terrorists.-How-disturbing.html>

<http://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/jun/29/bbc-to-review-use-of-islamic-state-after-mps-protest-against-term>

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/02/syria-debate-the-linguistic-battle-over-what-to-call-islamic-state>

<http://www.theweek.co.uk/isis/62422/islamic-state-daesh-or-isis-the-dilemma-of-naming-the-militants>

Style Guides

<http://www.theguardian.com/guardian-observer-style-guide-a>

<http://handbook.reuters.com/?title=A>