The influence and importance of language

January 22 2021

On Jan. 6 2021, a group of Trump supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol building, resulting in the death of five people. Credit: Tyler Merbler

In the hours immediately following the events at the United States Capitol on Jan. 6, no one quite knew how to describe what had happened. It wasn't simply because nothing like it had occurred in a century, but also because details regarding what preceded and took place

during the event itself—a breach by a large, angry group of Trump supporters that resulted in five deaths—still remains murky several weeks later.

Was it a "mob" or "protesters"? Were they "rioting," "attempting a coup," or "expressing their First Amendment rights"? Did it constitute "insurrection" in the true definition of the word? As more information came to light, media outlets evolved in their language.

But how much do specific labels matter, not only pertaining to this situation, but for the Black Lives Matter movement, for example, or discourse around the 2020 presidential election? How much influence do they have? The answers to these questions depend, in part, on context, says Penn sociolinguist Nicole Holliday.

"We give individual words too much power," she says. "It's an unusual perspective to have as a linguist, and I will caveat that by saying it's not true of slurs and hate speech. But it is true of words in conversation. When we use language in everyday life, we're imprecise. Your mental representation of what constitutes an insurrection might be different from mine."

Holliday describes a hypothetical conversation between two people with opposing political views. If they can align on at least the basic facts of what happened, she says, then the exact words matter less. "We never 100% agree on what words mean. We're always negotiating the meaning in any conversation that we're having, always trying to come to an understanding."

Such back and forth becomes much harder, impossible in some circumstances, when the words are read or heard as part of a news story rather than in a spoken conversation.

"Interacting with a media source is a one-way street. If you hear Rush Limbaugh say, 'It was an uprising,' you can't go back and ask, 'What do you mean by uprising?'" Holliday says. "This is why people feel strongly about the role of media responsibility in situations like this. There's no two-way dialog."

Press attention confers legitimacy, not just around word choices but also in the extent to which a publication gives a subject space and time, says Diana Mutz, a Penn professor of political science and communication. "The 'stop the steal' people have gotten a huge amount of attention from the press. Continuing to give this idea attention will help sustain it, and that's just not good for democracy, no matter your views."

Similarly, some high-ranking politicians backed the idea that the presidential election was stolen from the rightful winner, something that's never before happened, Mutz says.

"In the past, there were many members of the mass public who viewed the outcome as something other than the will of the people, but Congress and the president always supported the outcome, even when they didn't like it," she says. "That's what really marks this election as different. People in positions of power encouraged the mass public to view the outcome as illegitimate."

That came even at the highest level, with President Trump pushing out tweet after tweet describing the election results as fraudulent and calling the group who stormed the Capitol "special people." It was in stark relief to the way he described the Black Lives Matter movement, repeatedly calling the participants "terrorists," "anarchists," and "thugs."

"Semantically, 'thug' might just mean criminal. But, because we have too many examples of how it's used being used to described Black men, we know it doesn't just mean criminal. It means criminal, likely Black,

likely male," Holliday says. "Calling BLM protests 'mobs,' calling them 'violent,' calling them 'threatening,' all these adjectives describing the feeling of the event or the people who are there, it's very hard to not think about those words as racialized. They are racialized."

The researchers acknowledge that part of the problem is the relatively recent phenomenon of discussing complicated, divisive issues in sound bites on social media. Not only are those conversations devoid of nuance, but they put greater weight on each individual word and come at breakneck speed, one after the other, without time for well-reasoned dialog or conclusions.

"Republicans and Democrats alike feel a sense of fatigue at this point," Mutz says. "Politics has been more front and center every day for the past four years than in any time I can remember in my lifetime, even when we were at war. Even those of us who are political junkies would like it to recede into the background. Certainly, that reached an apex with what happened on Jan. 6."

How the conversations around challenging political and social issues move forward will depend on the ability of people with differing views to come to a shared truth about basic facts, Holliday says. "That's the backdrop on which everything happens. If we can agree on what to call something, then we're agreeing we have a shared reality." Without that, she adds, such conversations are possible but much much harder.

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

Citation: The influence and importance of language (2021, January 22) retrieved 17 July 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2021-01-importance-language.html

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