

Language change harms our ability to communicate and understand, researcher argues

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Poster for the 1944 film, Gaslight, based on the play by Patrick Hamilton.
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Changes to the definitions of conceptual words like "woke" and gaslighting are harming our ability to communicate and understand our experiences, a Leeds academic argues.

In a new paper published in *The Philosophical Quarterly* journal, an ethicist at the University of Leeds has coined a term for the harm caused when [language change](#) leaves us lost for words.

Words such as "woke," "depression," "gaslighting" and "emotional labor" have all deviated from their original meanings in recent years and left us disarmed without specific words to describe useful concepts, according to the paper.

Dr. Robert Morgan—a Lecturer and Consultant at the University's Interdisciplinary Ethics Applied (IDEA) Centre—calls the phenomenon "hermeneutical disarmament."

Dr. Morgan said, "Language is really important for us to understand the world and communicate about it. When it changes so quickly, it can feel like having the rug swept from under our feet. Language change happens all the time and it's overwhelmingly not harmful. I'm concerned about the cases where a word describes a very specific phenomenon. When the meaning of this word changes, we don't have another way of describing it."

'Woke'

The phrase "stay woke" was used by Blues singer Lead Belly in the 1930s as a warning to fellow African Americans to stay alert when traveling through more dangerous parts of the U.S.. With a specific function of communicating danger in the Jim Crow era, "woke" was an important and useful word

But today, the word has gone through so much change—from awareness of racial injustice to general progressiveness, then as a disparaging term used by right-wing commentators—that people are now "disarmed" of a word originally used for safety, according to the paper.

'Gaslighting'

"Gaslighting" originally referred to a very specific type of emotional abuse, coming from the 1938 play "Gaslight" by Patrick Hamilton. In the play, a husband tries to convince his wife that the dimming gas lights in their house are figments of her imagination in a manipulative effort to change her perception of reality.

But now, gaslight is being used much more generally to mean lying or misleading in political, journalistic and social media discourse, so people experiencing a specific type of abuse may not be able to identify or understand it as easily.

'Emotional labor'

"Emotional labor" was coined by sociologist Arlie Hochschild in the 1980s to describe the extra effort that service workers such as waiters use to manage their emotions to keep customers comfortable.

However, "emotional labor" has since been co-opted on social media to refer to [difficult tasks](#) that typically fall more on women than men—such as housework and managing social relationships.

Dr. Morgan said, "'Emotional labor' was another useful phrase, but the worry is that when we start using it in this really broad way to mean lots of different things, we now don't have a phrase to refer to that original phenomenon.

"For example, if you're a barista and you feel exhausted after a day of being expected to smile at every customer, you might be experiencing the downfalls of emotional labor in its original sense, but no longer be able to express this to your colleagues or even identify it."

The future of hermeneutical disarmament

Dr. Morgan is now calling for influential writers and speakers to bear in mind the history of the important terms they're using, to help slow down this phenomenon. He said, "People who are more influential when it comes to language change, such as journalists and [social media](#) influencers, should be careful about the way they're using these technical terms."

He also argues that there are positive cases of this phenomenon, where malicious actors can be "disarmed" of the language they use to spread hate. One example of this is "queer," which has been a disparaging term towards members of the LGBT+ community in the past. As the word is reclaimed by the community, it becomes less useful for those who would use it pejoratively.

More information: Robert Morgan, Hermeneutical Disarmament, *The Philosophical Quarterly* (2024). [DOI: 10.1093/pq/pqae046](https://doi.org/10.1093/pq/pqae046)

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