Controlling Language:
Who (or What) is in Control?

Fromm Institute - Winter Session 2019
Alice F. Freed, Ph.D
Major Themes and Questions

What does it mean to “control language?”

• Do we as speakers of English control our own language?

• If not, who controls what we say?

• Does “control” have anything to do with power?
Major Themes and Questions

• **Who** controls how we use our language?
• Do **other people** control what you say or write (or do)?
• Do **you** control what other people say or write (or do)?
• And **WHY** do we try to control language (or other people) anyway?!
Controlling Language

In this course we will examine a variety of linguistic phenomena that are related to “controlling language” and will explore the interplay among these forces.
Controlling Language

We will examine the following themes (though not necessarily in this order)

- Naming and everyday “control”
- Government and language control
- “Verbal hygiene”
- Language prescription
- Language planning, policy, and management
Controlling Language

- Language reform
- “Politically correct” language
- Language censorship
- Language ideologies
- Language change
We will observe two surprising facts:

1. Whenever people and institutions try to control language (even attempts to stop language from changing), the efforts ultimately contribute to

   • Language change (and changes in the way we use language)
2. When people and institutions try to control language, they think they are acting on issues pertaining to language. In fact, they are often motivated by

- Beliefs, ideologies, or assumptions that have broad social significance
Controlling Language

• These beliefs, ideologies, and assumptions are:
  • About language use, language form, and communication
  • AND about people, social groups, and political topics that are difficult to comment on or criticize directly
Beginning At The Beginning - Naming

The power of naming

• Control starts the moment we name a baby (or a product or an action)

• It is almost universal to give babies first names.
Naming - The Power Of Naming

• Religious, cultural, and social customs determine how we name babies (e.g., to name or not for a living relative)

• Rules or social restrictions exist about the actual linguistic form.
Naming - The Power Of Naming

Names always:

• Consist of a linguist form.

• Signify or point to a particular person.

• Become one’s identity.

• Are assigned according to cultural rules.
Naming - The Power Of Naming

More “Controls” on naming

• In English most names are marked for sex (though not gender)

• In English, boys (not girls) can have the term “Junior” added to their names.

• Women not men have “maiden” names.
Naming - The Power Of Naming

- Naming practices are different for first and last names.
- In industrial societies, assignment of surnames is strictly enforced.
- Laws and practices for last names depend on legal system, marriage, custom/tradition, religion, and politics.
Naming - The Power Of Naming

What personal control do we have over our own names?

• Can people change their names?
• Can people change both their first names and their surnames?
• Are people ever obliged to change parts of their names?
Naming - The Power Of Naming

• Who gives people nicknames?
• Can people change their nicknames?
• Can names always be uttered?
• Are there religious or cultural taboos about using names?
• Are kinship terms ever used in place of personal names?
Naming - The Power Of Naming

Sometimes people take control of their names:

- Trans women and men usually adopt new names to mark a change from the male or female group they were assigned to at birth.
Naming - The Power Of Naming

- Immigrants in the US sometimes change their names to English names – their first and/or last names – to signal a break with their country of origin and a sign of assimilation.
Who decides what name is used when someone speaks to you? Do you decide?

- In traditional Japan, speakers are often obliged to use **honorifics** with a name as a sign of politeness.

- The ending – *san* might be added to a first name to signal an added level of status to the person being spoken to.
Naming - The Power Of Naming

• Sometimes different names are used for the same person in different circumstances

• Some people choose and use alternative names as disguises: Aliases / Pseudonyms

• Intelligence agencies use code names as a disguise for operatives and operations
Naming - The Power Of Naming

• What is the significance of having the power to name someone (or something)?

• What do we think of one person being able to name another?

• Is this an example of language control?
Naming In The Bible

The story of creation as it relates to naming:

• According to Casey Miller and Kate Swift in *Words and Women* (1976), there are two stories of creation in Genesis.

• They explain: In the first chapter ‘God created man in his own image ... male and female created he them.’
Naming In The Bible

• In the 2nd chapter ‘God formed man of the dust of the ground’ and later made woman from man’s rib.’

• Historians have identified the 2nd story as the earlier version.

• Miller and Swift explain what is lost going from Ancient Hebrew to English.
Naming In The Bible

• They use the analysis of Phyllis Trible (feminist biblical scholar / professor at Wake Forest University and Andover Newton Theological School):

• “The “man” formed out of the dust of the ground, … is ‘adham
Naming In The Bible

• ‘adham (ha’adam) is a generic in ancient Hebrew that means humankind not “man.”

• The root of the word ‘adham, is ‘adhamah, a feminine noun that means soil or earth.
Naming In The Bible

• The original ‘adham is androgynous. God plans to make a “help meet” for the proto-human ‘adham

• First God creates the animals. Then ‘adham names the animals.

• By naming them, ‘adham claims authority over them. The animals are helpers serving humanity but not full partners.
Naming In The Bible

• Next God performs surgery on androgynous ‘adham to create an equal help meet.

• Until this point, the Hebrew storyteller uses the generic term ‘adham.

Naming In The Bible

• ‘Adham speaks of the two sexes in the third person.

• A translation of the Hebrew is:
  “She shall be called woman (‘ishshah), because she was differentiated from man (‘ish).

• Trible claims that “She shall be called woman” does not represent an act of naming.
Naming In The Bible

• The formula for naming is: the verb *to call* combined with the word *name* explicitly used as the object.

• This is the formula ‘*adham* used to name the animals.
Naming In The Bible

• “Adam” then uses the naming formula “to assert authority over the woman.”

  Compare:

  • He “called his wife’s name Eve.” (the naming formula)

  NOT

  • “She shall be called Eve.”
Naming In The Bible

Trible concludes:

- The naming of Eve by Adam is seen by God as an act in which the man corrupts a relationship of mutuality and equality.
- God then evicts the primal couple from Eden.
- Trible argues that this is evidence that naming was seen as an act of power in the Bible.
How Do We Use Names?

- Do our naming choices reveal anything about control and power?
- When we start talking to someone, we usually use a term of address plus a greeting [or a summons = way of getting someone’s attention]
How Do We Use Names?

• Terms of address signal something about the relationship between the people involved - their relative power or degree of solidarity
How Do We Use Names?

• In the United States, we choose how to address people depending on:
  • how well we know them
  • our relationship to them
  • what we want to signal about them
Using / Controlling Address Terms

Let’s look at a few examples:

• Good morning Sir. How are you?
• Good morning, David. How are you?
• Good morning, Mr. Stanton. How are you?
• Good morning, Mrs. Stanton. How are you?
• Good morning, Dr. Stanton. How are you?
• Good morning, President Stanton. How are you?
• Good morning, sweetie. How are you?
• Good morning, babe. How are you?
Using / Controlling Address Terms

- When we introduce ourselves to strangers, we make a decision about how to present ourselves.

- The naming is a self-reference and a marker of identity.

- The context determines our choices and our choices affect the context.
Using / Controlling Address Terms

• Hi. I’m Alice.
• Hi, I’m Alice Freed.
• Hi. I’m Professor Freed.
• Hi, I’m Dr. Freed.
• Hi, I’m Dr. Alice Freed.
• Hi, I’m Marc’s mother.

BUT, do I have total control over my choices?
Using / Controlling Address Terms

• The person I am talking to also gets to choose a name in replying to me.

• There are 3 types of exchanges in 2 party interactions:
  
  A. Reciprocal First Name
  B. Reciprocal Title + Last Name
  C. Non-reciprocal Naming
Using / Controlling Address Terms

A. Reciprocal First Name
   Hi, John. How are you?
   Great. How are you Alice?

B. Reciprocal Title + Last Name
   Hi, Dr. Wall. How are you?
   Fine. How are you Dr. Freed?

C. Non-reciprocal
   Hi, Dr. Wall. How are you?
   Hi Alice. I’m doing well.
Using / Controlling Address Terms

• We can also choose how to name someone when introducing one person to another.
  • Hi, I’d like to introduce you to Sandra.
  • Hi, I’d like to introduce you to Sandra Morgan.
  • Hi. I’d like to introduce you to Professor Morgan.
Using / Controlling Address Terms

• Hi, I’d like to introduce you to Dr. Morgan.
• Hi, I’d like to introduce you to Dr. Sandra Morgan.
• Hi, I’d like to introduce you to Marc’s mother.
Using / Controlling Address Terms

• Naming is often politically sensitive.

• Naming practices occupy a powerful place in the history of race, the feminist movement, and many social liberations movements.
Using / Controlling Address Terms

• The following is a very different sort of example.

• Exchange in a southern US city between Alvin F. Poussaint, an African American psychiatrist, Harvard educator, and a white police officer.

Using / Controlling Address Terms

- Policeman: “What’s your name, boy?”
- Doctor Poussaint: “I’m a physician.”
- Policeman: “What’s your first name, boy?”
- Doctor Poussaint: “Alvin”
Psychologist Susan Ervin-Tripp (1972) explains:

- Poussaint was forced to insult himself publicly by violating rules for address terms in American English.

- Medical doctors in the USA are granted status and respect by being addressed as “Dr.”
Using / Controlling Address Terms

• The police officer controlled the language of the situation.

• He refused to use the term Dr. (the appropriate title).

• By calling Dr. Poussaint “boy” - the police officer treated him as a child and ignored his professional status.
Using / Controlling Address Terms

• When we call people by inappropriate or insulting terms, we gain control of a situation or of a person and they lose control.

  • Hey, stupid. What are you doing?
  • Hey, asshole, who do you think you are?
  • Go ask the jerk over there.
Control And Names In Politics

• Sometimes adjectives are added to names or words for effect

• Neutral names or words become “marked” forms, adding unneeded, even insulting information

  Woman president
  Black congressman
  Minority candidate
Control And Names In Politics

• Names that Donald Trump made famous, used as insulting terms of reference:

  Crooked Hillary
  Lying Ted
  Little Marco
Controlling Language In Politics And Government

• George Orwell said that having language makes humans easy to control.

• If we control people’s language, we can control them.
Controlling Language In Politics And Government

• The governmental often chooses terms (often euphemisms) to manage (=control) how the public thinks about things:
  • enhanced interrogation techniques
  • American exceptionalism
  • friendly fire
Controlling Language In Politics And Government

- collateral damage
- deficit reduction (= cuts)
- austerity measures
- anchor baby (children born in US of non-citizen parents)
Controlling Language In Politics And Government

- Consider these additional variations:
  - *undocumented immigrant* versus *illegal alien*
  - *climate change* versus *global warming*
  - *progressive* versus *left-wing* versus *liberal*
Controlling Language In Politics

• Examples from 2018 American Dialect Society “Word of the Year”

• Look at nominations from two categories:
  • “Political Word of the Year”
  • “Euphemism of the Year”
Controlling Language In Politics

- Nominations for “Political Word of the Year”

  *blue wave*: major Democratic electoral gain
  *caravan*: procession of Central American asylum seekers to US/Mexico border
  *lodestar*: guiding principle (used in op/ed by anonymous White House staffer)
Controlling Language In Politics

- Nominations for “Political Word of the Year”

  **nationalist:** displaying a staunch belief in one’s own nation (used by Trump and supporters)

  **(the) wall:** proposed barrier along the US/Mexico border to prevent illegal crossings
Controlling Language In Politics

- Nominations for “Euphemism of the Year” -
  - **executive time:** presidential down-time
  - **Individual 1:** pseudonym for Trump in documents from the Mueller investigation
  - **racially charged:** circumlocution for “racist”
  - **tender-age camp/shelter/ facility:** government detention center for asylum-seekers’ children
Controlling Language In Politics

- 2018 American Dialect Society Word of the Year
- “Tender-age shelter”
Organizing Questions:

• Why do people and institutions try to control language?

• What is the significance of these language practices?

• What is the source of these language practices?

• Do people really need to keep “fixing” language?
Defining Terms To Work With

• How should we define “control?”
• What exactly do we mean by “language?”
• Is there anything about human language that makes it especially “controllable?”
Defining The Word Control

CONTROL
/kənˈtrəl/

noun

the power to influence or direct people's behavior or the course of events.

synonyms: jurisdiction, sway, power, authority, command, dominance, government, mastery, leadership, rule, sovereignty, supremacy, ascendancy;
Defining The Word *Control*

**CON·TROL**
/kənˈtrōl/

*verb*

to determine the behavior or supervise the running of.

**synonyms:**
be in charge of, run, manage, direct, administer, head, preside over, supervise, superintend, steer; command, rule, govern, lead, dominate, hold sway over
What Is Human Language?

• Is human language an instinct or a learned behavior?

• Is it innate or acquired through specific learning?
What Is Human Language?

- An abstract cognitive system, unique to humans, that allows us to produce and understand meaningful utterances in sociocultural contexts as part of everyday human life
What Is Human Language?

- A system of arbitrary vocal symbols that combine in an infinite number of ways to convey meaning in particular cultural contexts.
Verbal Hygiene

“A struggle to control language by defining its nature.”

Next Week - More About “Verbal Hygiene”
END OF CLASS #1