

# The bad-faith use of words

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“When *I* use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master — that’s all.”

I am a mathematician. In mathematical writing, we frequently define new technical terms. Sometimes these terms are new coinages — like the physicists’ “quark” — but more often they are words borrowed from the ordinary English language and given new meanings. Things like:

**Definition.** A *hedgehog* is a Siegel compactum around an irrationally indifferent fixed point that is not contained in the closure of a linearization domain.

This definition is clear and unambiguous (to any suitably trained reader, it goes without saying). No mathematician would object to this definition on the grounds that it conflicts with the established meaning of “hedgehog” in zoology. Everyone knows that this is a technical term with a precise local meaning, and there is zero risk of confusion.

Charles Dodgson (better known by his pseudonym Lewis Carroll) was a distinguished mathematician as well as a novelist. Humpty Dumpty’s dictum that “a word means just what I choose it to mean” — often viewed as satirical — is in reality nothing more than standard mathematical practice.

So no mathematician would object were an article to begin:

In this article the word “transphobic” means “a view on sex and gender that disagrees with gender-identity ideology”.

Or perhaps more simply:

In this article the word “transphobic” means “a view on sex and gender that disagrees with mine”.

This redefinition of a well-known word might be considered bizarre or idiosyncratic, but at least it would be up-front; no reader would be misled.

Alas, writers on social and political issues rarely introduce their redefinitions so forthrightly. Instead, they smuggle them in surreptitiously: employing a word in a private technical sense at the same time as they allow their readers to interpret the word in its ordinary English-language sense — the one in which “transphobic” means “characterized by fear of (or perhaps hatred of) transgender people”. To put it bluntly, these authors try to win an argument by deceiving their readers: by creating and then exploiting a confusion between two meanings of the same English word.

But those who use the word “transphobic” in this way are probably not conscious of their chicanery. Indeed, they would vehemently deny it. To them “transphobic” probably signifies something like “opposed to the legitimate rights of transgender people”, and they assume that their readers understand this.

But the whole problem, of course, is that different people have different ideas about what the legitimate rights of transgender people *are* — for instance, when it comes to using single-sex changing rooms or competing in women’s sports. So the writer uses the word “transphobic” to mean “opposed to *what I conceive to be* the legitimate rights of transgender people” without making this crucial clarification explicit — much less explaining what that hidden conception *is* — and the reader is once again deceived.

Unfortunately, even professors of philosophy — a discipline that devotes great attention to precision in the use of words — can fall into this trap. For instance, in an open letter, written by a group of distinguished philosophers, protesting the award of a British government honor to philosopher Kathleen Stock — a stance that is surely within their rights to take, just as others may hold a different opinion — the authors casually label Professor Stock’s work as “transphobic fearmongering”. Nowhere in the letter do they define that inflammatory adjective, much less engage with (or even accurately characterize) the content of Stock’s arguments.

Sometimes this terminological ploy is combined with even more brazen attempts to win a social or political argument by linguistic fiat. A recent open letter on trans rights addressed to Advance HE — a British NGO devoted to promoting racial and sexual equality, diversity and inclusion in higher education — provides a rather extreme example. After the customary denigration of the authors’ opponents as “dangerously transphobic”, the letter continues:

[T]he Gender in HE Conference 2022 was originally scheduled to include a panel on “connections and tensions between sex-based and gender-inclusive rights”. The very framing of this panel implied that the rights of cis women and trans women are separate and in tension. However, from the standpoint of inclusivity as upheld by the Athena Swan Charter principles, trans women are women and hence there is no such tension.

The logic is breathtaking. Since “trans women” — that is to say, biological males who consider themselves to be women — are in fact women, there *cannot be any tension* between the interests of “cis women” and “trans women”. Q.E.D.

So the authors of this letter do not simply wish to *win* an argument by linguistic sleight of hand. They want to demonstrate that there is *nothing to debate* — that a thorny social and political issue is in fact nonexistent.

No need, therefore, to give sensitive and empathetic consideration to the legitimate — and unfortunately conflicting — interests of different groups of people. No need to discuss respectfully across identity and ideological lines, and to craft fair compromises. Quite simply, *there is no tension*: end of story.

Of course, this purported “demonstration” is rubbish. The premise of the argument, that “trans women are women” — or to spell it out more precisely, that “trans women” and natal women should be treated in the same manner in all situations — is exactly what is under debate. The authors prove that they are right by *assuming* that they are right. This venerable tactic is called “begging the question”.

Indeed, even if one accepts for the sake of argument that “trans women are women”, the logic still fails. Black women are women — no one denies that — but it does not

follow that there can never be any tension between the interests of Black women and other women. (Such tensions are what “intersectionality” is all about, after all.)

Of course, the locution “trans woman” is itself a linguistic swindle. Ordinary usage tells us that “adjective + noun” describes a subclass of whatever is described by “noun” (of course there are exceptions, such as “dry ice”, but this is anyway the general rule); and this grammatical rule is implicit in every English speaker’s brain. So the locution “trans woman” induces its hearers to accept, *unthinkingly*, that *of course* trans women are women — and this, not as the outcome of a delicate social and political debate about who should have access to which spaces, but simply as a tautology, on a par with the innocuous assertion that “Japanese women are women”. I confess that I myself once fell into this trap, until a gender-critical feminist philosopher friend pointed out my error.

(It’s probably too late to change this deceptive terminology, but here is a modest suggestion: in the future let’s write “transwoman” rather than “trans woman”. Unfortunately, that won’t help much in oral discussions.)

Gender-identity ideology may be an extreme case in its stratagem to win political arguments by twisting the meaning of everyday English words, but it is far from the only example. Both sides in the debate over “critical race theory” have, unfortunately, employed this same tactic. Right-wingers have often attached the label “critical race theory” to any effort, no matter how fair-minded and evidence-based, to study and teach honestly about the history of slavery and racial discrimination. Defenders of critical race theory, in response, have often pretended that it constitutes *nothing more than* an effort to study and teach honestly about the history of slavery and racial discrimination. Both are misrepresentations — and the confusion is compounded by the fact that “critical race theory” does not connote any unique doctrine, but rather a congeries of related but sometimes-conflicting views.

Let me be clear: I am not complaining about the fact that the meanings of words evolve over time. For instance, the word “parent” traditionally meant “a person who is one of the progenitors of a child”, i.e. a biological parent; but nowadays most people understand the word to mean “a person who takes on parental responsibilities towards a child”, i.e. a legal parent or social parent, and we say explicitly “biological parent” whenever that is what we mean. In fact, as an adoptive parent myself, I would be incensed if someone, using the old definition, were to tell me that I am not a *real* parent.

So the problem is not that the meanings of words change over time, with usage; that is to be taken for granted. The problem is when writers *at a given time* use words in a sense that is radically different from how their readers will interpret those words *at that same time* — and when, moreover, that misinterpretation plays a central role in making a flawed argument seem to be strong.

That said, my plea for writers on all sides to be more careful in their use of words may, I acknowledge, be whistling in the wind. Since time immemorial, contenders in public debate have employed deceptive tactics in an effort to help their side to “win”, and specialists in advertising and public relations have over the years refined that practice. It is probably unrealistic to expect people, right now, to voluntarily moderate their use of this tried-and-true method, precisely at a time when social media have supercharged its effectiveness.

There are also psychological obstacles. When people feel that they are right about

some issue, they are tempted to cut corners in debate: rather than explaining forthrightly the reasons *why* they consider themselves to be right — and thereby opening up that reasoning to public critique and possible refutation — they may take for granted that they *are* right and simply seek the most efficacious way to lead their audience to that desired conclusion. This temptation applies with especial psychological force whenever the issue under debate is intensely moral: people can convince themselves that the morally virtuous goal justifies the lesser ethical transgression of deception. Moreover, this temptation is reinforced whenever one or both sides in the debate consider it to be, not just a discrete disagreement over some matter of public policy, but one skirmish in a war between good and evil. By contrast, good-faith participation in public debate requires each of us to acknowledge that *we might be wrong*; and people nowadays seem increasingly disinclined to concede this possibility, especially on issues having an intense moral valence.

So the solution may be, not to train public commentators to be more honest, but to train readers and listeners to be more discerning: to be better detectors of deceptive argumentation. Particularly when terms with a pejorative connotation are employed — words like “transphobic” (to say nothing of its vicious cousin, “TERF”), “misogynist”, “sexist”, “racist”, “fascist”, “antisemitic” and “Islamophobic”, to name just a few — readers should ask themselves: What is the author’s implicit definition of this term? Does this usage conform to the commonly accepted definition? And does the evidence (if any) presented by the author substantiate the accusation, as interpreted in each of the two definitions?

Perhaps, if readers and listeners were to become more discerning, writers and speakers would have less incentive to engage in linguistic subterfuge.

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**Postscript.** Professor John McWhorter (private communication) has pointed out to me that the phrase “bad faith” in my title is ambiguous and could potentially lead to confusion, as it might seem that I am accusing people of *deliberate* deception. It seems to me that John has a point, so I’d like to clarify.

In the fifth paragraph of my article, I say explicitly that

those who use the word “transphobic” in this way are probably not conscious of their chicanery. Indeed, they would vehemently deny it.

Of course, one can never be sure about another person’s state of mind; but my *best guess* is that the people who use the word “transphobic” in the way documented in my article — and those on both sides of the debate about critical race theory who misuse that term — are not, at least in most cases, being *deliberately* deceptive. On the other hand, as I demonstrate in the following paragraph, these people *are* deliberately cutting corners that they should know they have no right to cut.

I am struck by the analogy with U.S. libel law after the landmark 1964 case of *New York Times v. Sullivan*, in which the Supreme Court ruled that plaintiffs who are public officials (or later, “public figures”) would have to prove not only that the statements

were defamatory and false, but that they were made either in the knowledge they are false or with reckless disregard for whether they are true or false. It seems to me that the people who use “transphobic” or “critical race theory” in the way discussed in my article are writing with reckless disregard for whether their readers will understand this term in the same way they are using it; and they are probably at least subconsciously aware of the political advantages that this misunderstanding will bring them. That is what I mean by “bad faith”.

Thanks, John, for drawing my attention to this ambiguity.