

2. Allport states, "Especially in a culture where uniformity is prized, the name of *any* deviant carries with it *ipso facto* a negative value-judgment" (17). This was written in the 1950s. Since then, the turbulent 1960s, the political correctness movement of the 1980s and 1990s and the years since the millennium, and the mainstreaming of "alternative" cultures have all attempted to persuade people to accept differences and be more tolerant. Write an essay in which you consider Allport's statement today. Which labels that identify someone as different still carry a negative association? Have the social movements of the past decades changed in a fundamental way how we think about others? Do you think there is more acceptance of nonconformity today, or is a nonconformist or member of a minority still subjected to negative, though perhaps more subtle, labeling? Support your conclusions with examples from your own experience and from the depiction of current events in the popular media.
3. Allport wrote *The Nature of Prejudice* before the civil rights movement began in earnest, though he did live to see it grow and reach its climax at the famous 1963 march on Washington. (See Martin Luther King Jr.'s celebrated "I Have a Dream" speech on p. 244) Obviously, part of the civil rights movement was in the arena of language, and its leaders often used impressive rhetoric to confront the language of prejudice. Write an essay in which you analyze how the kinds of labels and symbols identified by Allport were used in speeches and documents both to justify the continuation of segregation and prejudice and to decry it. How did the leaders of the civil rights movement use language to their advantage? To what emotions or ideas did the language of the opposition appeal? The Internet and your library have vast information about the movement's genesis and history, so it may be difficult at first to decide on a specific area of research. Start by looking at how language was used by both sides in the battle over civil rights.

## Words with Built-in Judgments

S. I. HAYAKAWA AND ALAN R. HAYAKAWA

*S. I. Hayakawa (1906–1992), a former senator from California and honorary chair of the English-only movement, wrote the influential semantics text Language in Thought and Action in 1941. With the help of his son Alan, he brought out the fifth edition of the book in 1990. Born in Vancouver, Canada, to Japanese parents, Hayakawa attended the University of Manitoba, McGill University, and the University of Wisconsin before beginning a career as a professor of English. He later became president of San Francisco State University. Hayakawa's other language books include Our Language and Our World (1959) and Symbol, Status, and Personality (1963).*

*Alan Hayakawa was born in Chicago in 1946 and received a B.A. in mathematics from Reed College in 1970. He began his writing career as a reporter for the Oregonian in Portland, Oregon, in 1975, and he moved to Washington, D.C., in 1987 as the Oregonian's Washington correspondent. He is now the manager of the InsideLine, a telephone news and information service, at the Patriot-News in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. In addition to coauthoring the fifth edition of Language in Thought and Action, Hayakawa has coauthored The Blair Handbook (4th ed., 2003), and the College Writer's Reference (2002), now in its third edition.*

*In Language in Thought and Action, from which the following selection is taken, the Hayakawas explore the complex relationships that exist between reality and the language we use to describe it. They demonstrate the power that some words — especially those associated with "race, religion, political heresy, and economic dissent" — have to evoke strong emotional responses. As Japanese Americans, they have felt this power firsthand. The Hayakawas explain how an awareness of the power of words can help writers and speakers avoid both stirring up traditional prejudices and unintentionally giving offense.*

**WRITING TO DISCOVER:** *People often use labels such as teenager, Iraqi, blind, senior citizen, liberal, and Japanese to describe other people quickly. Spend some time carefully listening to the labels you use, and make a list of them. Do these labels give an accurate picture of a whole person? Do they carry implied judgments? Explain.*

The fact that some words simultaneously arouse both informative and affective connotations gives a special complexity to discussions

involving religious, racial, national, and political groups. To many people, the word "communist" has both the informative connotation of "one who believes in communism" and the affective connotation of "one whose ideals and purposes are altogether repellent." Words applying to occupations of which one disapproves ("pickpocket," racketeer," "prostitute") and those applying to believers in philosophies of which one disapproves ("atheist," "radical," "heretic," "materialist," "fundamentalist") likewise often communicate *simultaneously* a fact and a judgment on that fact. Such words may be called "loaded" — that is, their affective connotations may strongly shape people's thoughts.

In some parts of the United States, there is a strong prejudice against certain ethnic groups, such as Mexican Americans, whether immigrant or American-born. The strength of this prejudice is revealed by the fact that polite people and the press have stopped using the word "Mexican," using the term "Hispanic" instead to avoid any negative connotations. There are also terms such as "Chicano" and "Latino" that Mexican American and Spanish-speaking groups have chosen to describe themselves.

Names that are "loaded" tend to influence behavior toward those to whom they are applied. Currently, the shop doorways and freeway underpasses of American cities are sheltering tens of thousands of people who have no work and no homes. These people used to be referred to as "bums" — a word that suggests not only a lack of employment but a lack of desire to work, people who are lazy, satisfied with little, and who have no desire to enter the mainstream of the American middle class or subscribe to its values. Thus, to think of these people as "bums" is to think that they are only getting what they deserve. With the search for new names for such people — "street people," "homeless," "displaced persons" — we may find new ways of thinking about their situation that may in turn suggest new ways of helping deal with it. Similarly, "problem drinker" has replaced "drunkard" and "substance abuser" has replaced "junkie." "Developmentally disabled" has replaced "retarded," which in turn replaced "idiot."

The negative connotations of words sometimes change because of deliberate changes in the way they are used. Michael Harrington, the American socialist, has said that "socialist" became a political dirty word in the 1930s and 1940s in the United States when opposing politicians and editorialists repeatedly linked "socialism" and "communism," obscuring what adherents to the two philosophies saw as distinctions between them. In the 1964 presidential campaign, it was said by his opponents that Senator Barry Goldwater was "too conservative" to be made president. The negative connotations of "conservative" had receded by 1988; in that presidential campaign, then Vice President George Bush repeatedly amplified the negative connotations of the word "liberal" and then accused his opponent, Michael Dukakis, of being one.

The meaning of words also changes from speaker to speaker, from hearer to hearer, and from decade to decade. An elderly Japanese woman of my acquaintance used to squirm at the mention of the word "Jap." "Whenever I hear that word," she used to say, "I feel dirty all over." She was reacting to the negative connotations as it was used during the Second World War and earlier. More recently, "JAP" is an acronym for "Jewish American princess," heard as an insult by an entirely different ethnic group.

A black friend of mine recalls hitchhiking as a young man in the 1930s through an area of the country where very few blacks lived. He was given a ride by a white couple, who fed him and gave him a place to sleep in their home. However, they kept referring to him as "little nigger," which upset him profoundly. He finally asked them not to call him by that "insulting term," a request they had difficulty understanding, as they had not meant to offend him. One way my friend might have explained his point further would have been to say, "Excuse me, but in the part of the country I come from, white people who wish to show contempt for my race call us 'niggers.' I assume this is not your intention."

In recent times, the negative connotations of the word "nigger" are more widely understood. This is partly the result of efforts by black Americans and others to educate the public. Early in 1942, when I was living in Chicago and teaching at the Illinois Institute of Technology, I was invited to become a columnist for the *Chicago Defender* — at that time the most militant of Negro newspapers. I say "Negro" rather than "black" because this was 1942 and it was the mission of that newspaper to make people proud of being "Negro." The word "Negro" at that time was used with dignity and pride. In its editorial policy, the *Defender* saw to it that the word was used in that way. It was always capitalized. Later, during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, a wider effort was made to make just this point in the mind of the American public as a whole, first substituting "Negro" for "colored," "nigger," "nigrah," and, later, substituting "black" for "Negro." "Black" is now the word most frequently chosen by people of African origin in the United States to describe themselves, and the word "Negro" is considered by many to be old-fashioned, and condescending. Most recently, it has been proposed that "African American" be substituted for "black." *Those who believe that the meaning of a word is innately part of the word risk offending or being offended because of having ignored differences in context or current usage.*

The conflicts that erupt over words are invariably an index to social concerns over the reality that the words refer to. Much debate has arisen over the issue of sexual discrimination in language. Is it fair, many people ask, that the word "man" should stand for all human beings, male and female? Should we say, "Everyone should cast his vote," when half the voters are women? Are there biases that are unfair to women — and to men — built into the English language? If so, what can or should be done about it?

The problem can be better understood if we look at the disputed words in the contexts in which they appear. In some contexts, the extensional meaning of "man" as a synonym for the species *Homo sapiens* covers both sexes, without any discrimination implied: men, women, and children; Englishmen, Chinese, Eskimos, Aborigines, next-door neighbors, and so forth. In other contexts, "man" refers only to the male: "There is a man at the door." The problems with connotation occur in a context such as: "The work team is short ten men." In such a case the employer may be inclined to look for ten more males to hire, even when the work can be done equally well by women.

The Chinese ideograph [人], also used in Japanese, stands for "man" in the generic sense: "person," "human being." A different ideograph [男] is used for "man" in the sense of "male human being." Since women traditionally have been assigned subordinate roles in both Chinese and Japanese cultures, discrimination against women cannot be said to be due solely to the peculiarities of language.

For those who have no difficulty with the different meanings of "man," or who like the maleness they find in the generic term, the language needs no modification. But what about those who are dissatisfied with the masculine connotations of "man"? What about the woman on the softball team who insists on being called "first baseperson" or the committee leader who styles herself "chairperson"? What about the woman named "Cooperman" who wanted to change her name to "Cooperperson" and petitioned a court to legalize the change? (Her petition was denied.) Can the language accommodate them?

Fortunately, the language is flexible enough for people to make personal adjustments to meet their own standards. "Human beings" or "humans" or "people" are acceptable substitutes for the generic "man," though rhetorically they may not always sound as good. Instead of saying "Man is a tool-using animal," we can say, "Human beings are tool-using animals."

Once it becomes apparent that we can construct any sentence we please without incurring possible sexual stereotypes, a further question remains: Should we demand that all writers adopt a "nonsexist" vocabulary and always use it — for example, the neutral plural? On this point history offers some guidance.

Most of the attempts made to force living language into a doctrinaire program have failed resoundingly. Jonathan Swift once spoke out acidly against the use of the word "mob" as a corrupt shortening of the Latin term *mobile vulgus*. Dr. Samuel Johnson resisted, to no avail, the admission of the word "civilization" into his dictionary because it seemed to him a barbarism, despite its respectable Latin root. In this century, Mussolini tried to eliminate the informal *tu* in Italian (the second person singular pronoun, whose English counterpart, "thou," has disappeared in ordinary English usage). He covered Italy with posters commanding Italians to use

the *voi* form instead. His campaign failed. The social forces that created the words in the first place could not be changed by logic, fiat, or program. Language has usually proven stronger than the individual.

It must not be forgotten that language, created over centuries and inherited with our culture, does not exert its tyranny uniformly over all who use it. In the novel *Kingsblood Royal* by Sinclair Lewis, actually a tract against racial prejudice, the central character is a vicious racial bigot — but he is careful never to use the word "nigger."

Similarly, an individual who uses "sexist" terms uncritically may have all kinds of discriminatory attitudes towards women, or he — or she — may be entirely free of them. The presence or absence of such terms has no necessary connection with the presence or absence of the corresponding attitudes.

This does not mean that writers who are sensitive to sexual bias in language should resign themselves to what they consider a sorry state of affairs. They can carry out their own programs within their own speech and writing. These efforts are not without risk of accidentally engendering new, unintended meanings. For example, in revising the words of hymns, the Episcopal Church changed "Christian Men, Rejoice!" to "Christian Friends, Rejoice!" However, as Sara Mosle pointed out in *The New Republic*, the theological implications of extending joy only to friends — what about Christian enemies, or even strangers? — were entirely inappropriate to the message of the hymn. "How long would it be before Christmas cards read 'Peace on Earth, good will towards friends?'" A different proposition altogether from the brotherly (or sisterly) benediction to all mankind."

The calling of attention to sex discrimination contained within language, a campaign conducted in a similar way to that by which "Negro" and then "black" were successfully substituted for "colored," has served to raise society's awareness of the problem of built-in bias in language, even though it has not yet transformed the language. Even if such efforts fail to dislodge all forms of gender bias in the language, the effort to correct the problem is, in itself, worthwhile. As the poet John Ciardi has observed:

In the long run the usage of those who do not think about the language will prevail. Usages I resist will become acceptable. It will not do to resist uncompromisingly. Yet those who care have a duty to resist. Changes that occur against such resistance are tested changes. The language is better for them — and for the resistance.

One other curious fact needs to be recorded about the words we apply to such hotly debated issues as race, religion, political heresy, and economic dissent. Every reader is acquainted with people who, according to their own flattering descriptions of themselves, "believe in being frank" and like to "tell it like it is." By "telling it like it is," such people

usually mean calling anything or anyone by the term which has the strongest and most disagreeable affective connotations. Why people should pin medals on themselves for "candor" for performing this nasty feat has often puzzled me. Sometimes it is necessary to violate verbal taboos as an aid to clearer thinking, but, more often, to insist upon "telling it like it is" is to provide our minds with a greased runway down which we may slide back into unexamined and reactive patterns of evaluation and behavior.

### FOCUSING ON CONTENT

1. In the beginning of the essay, what do the Hayakawas mean by an informative connotation? An affective connotation? (Glossary: *Connotation/Denotation*) What do the Hayakawas mean when they characterize words that have both connotations as "loaded" (1)?
2. How can names "influence behavior toward those to whom they are applied" (3)? What is the difference in affective connotation between calling someone a "bum" and saying that a person is "homeless"?
3. What do the Hayakawas mean when they say, "*Those who believe that the meaning of a word is innately part of the word risk offending or being offended because of having ignored differences in context or current usage*" (7)?
4. What does history tell us about attempts to force changes on a living language?
5. Is a person who uses sexist terms necessarily sexist? (Glossary: *Sexist Language*) Explain.

### FOCUSING ON WRITING

1. Trace one of the examples given by the Hayakawas in paragraph 3 regarding how potentially loaded words have evolved over the years, such as the evolution of the term *idiot*. How effective do you find their use of examples in general and this example in particular? (Glossary: *Examples*)
2. The Hayakawas structure paragraphs 11 and 12 as a question-and-answer segment. In paragraph 11, they ask if the language is able to accommodate those who seek to remove sexist or gender-specific references in everyday words. Paragraph 12 answers in the affirmative, concluding that gender-neutral substitutions are acceptable even though "they may not always sound as good." Why do you think the Hayakawas structure their discussion of gender-specific references in this way? What does it indicate about their intended audience? (Glossary: *Audience*)
3. In what is a rather academic and straightforward piece, the Hayakawas introduce the image of a "greased runway" at the very end of their discussion. To what does the greased runway refer? Do you find it an effective image? Do you think it's appropriate to introduce such a metaphor so late in the piece? (Glossary: *Figurative Language*) Why or why not?

### LANGUAGE IN ACTION

Sometimes a word can become so loaded that it irrevocably affects other valid words. The following article by Steven Pinker, which first appeared in the *New York Times* on February 2, 1999, reveals how this can happen. Consider the plight of David Howard, whose correct, nonpejorative use of the word *niggardly* set off a firestorm of controversy and cost him his job. Jot down your reactions to the situation. Do you think Howard should have been fired? Do you agree that the word *niggardly* should be removed from the vocabulary of our society, regardless of its actual meaning and derivation? Explain your answers.

### RACIST LANGUAGE, REAL AND IMAGINED

Last week David Howard, an aide to the Mayor of Washington, resigned after a staff meeting in which he called his budget "niggardly." A colleague thought he had used a racial epithet, though in fact "niggard" is a Middle English word meaning "miser." It has nothing to do with the racial slur based on Spanish for "black," which came into English centuries later.

This is not the first time the inaccurate parsing of an innocent remark has led to confusion. Remember, in "Annie Hall," how Woody Allen thinks he has been the target of an anti-Semitic slur from two people on a New York street? One person had asked, "Dj'ou eat yet?" and his companion had replied, "No, dj'ou?"

Last week's misunderstanding was of a different sort. "Niggardly" may be unexceptionable on etymological grounds, but given what we know about how the mind deals with language, the word was a disaster waiting to happen.

Most words and parts of words have many meanings, and when we listen to someone speak, our brains have to find the right ones. Some recent laboratory experiments indicate that this is a two-stage process.

First, all the meanings of a word, including inappropriate ones, light up willy-nilly in the brain. When we hear about "spiders, roaches, and bugs," the thought of surveillance devices flashes through our minds for a few hundredths of a second — until that misinterpretation is repressed by our analysis of the context.

Thus it is impossible for anyone to hear "niggardly" without thinking, if only for a moment, of the ethnic slur.

Worse, the context is of little help in squelching the wrong meaning. Everyone is an amateur linguist, and we all strive for a logical — though sometimes incorrect — parsing of what we hear. This is why folk etymologies are rampant in dialects, like "sparrowgrass" (asparagus) and "very-close" (varicose) veins.

Many phrases have become standard English, like chaise longue (from the French chaise longue or "long chair"), cockroach (from the Spanish cucaracha) and bridegroom (originally bridgome, Middle English for "bride man").

"Niggardly" is easy to misparse. English grammar allows a "d" or "ed" to be stuck on a noun to form an adjective (as in "hook-nosed" and "left-handed"), and it allows "ly" to be put on an adjective to form an adverb.

Thus we get "absent-mindedly," "good-humoredly," "half-heartedly," "markedly," "otherworldly," "pointedly," "shame-facedly," and "single-handedly."

The “a” is not much help, because “ar” often substitutes for “er” — as in “beggar,” “burglar,” “hangar,” and “scholar.”

Worst of all, the deducible meaning makes all-too-good linguistic sense. Terms for stinginess and duplicitousness are among the most common examples of racist language: “to gyp” (probably from gypsy), “to welsh” (perhaps from Welsh), “Dutch treat,” “Indian giver.”

Does this mean a perfectly innocent word is doomed? It would not be the first time. Words are often sacrificed when they take on secondary, emotionally charged meanings. “Queer,” for example, is now problematic, and many animals (like donkeys) are losing their fine old Anglo-Saxon names.

If you find yourself vaguely offended thinking of the other words I could have included here, you should have some sympathy for David Howard’s audience.

Still, Mr. Howard should get his job back. Though “niggardly” begs to be misunderstood, the misunderstanding can be overruled. After the various associates of a word light up in the mental dictionary, the rest of the brain can squelch the unintended ones, thanks to the activity that psycholinguists call “post-lexical-access processing” and that other people call “common sense.”

### WRITING SUGGESTIONS

1. The Hayakawas’ discussion of loaded words reflects a national movement and debate — termed *political correctness* — that, among other goals, seeks to aggressively remove loaded words from common use. Such terms as *chair-person*, *physically challenged*, and *sanitation technician* have become part of our everyday vocabulary. Still, many argue that political correctness has gone too far, and some even parody the movement: Should short people, for example, be termed *vertically challenged*? What do you think about political correctness? How has it changed the way you speak and the level of awareness — and respect — you have for others who are different from you? Write an essay in which you discuss your experiences with political correctness and how important you believe it is. Has it gone too far, making it too easy for some people to take offense at just about anything you say? Or is it helpful in eliminating loaded terms that imply disrespect?
2. Reread the quote from John Ciardi (18). He has a pessimistic view when he says, “In the long run the usage of those who do not think about the language will prevail.” What does he mean by this statement? Write an essay in which you agree or disagree with his view. How does language change? How can those who do not care about it affect its change? What can those who do care about it do to fulfill what Ciardi calls their “duty to resist”?

## The Meanings of a Word

GLORIA NAYLOR

Novelist and essayist Gloria Naylor was born in New York City in 1950. She worked as a missionary for the Jehovah’s Witnesses from 1967 to 1975 and then as a telephone operator until 1981, the year she graduated from Brooklyn College. Naylor later started a graduate program in African American studies at Yale University. In her fiction, she explores the lives of African American women, drawing freely from her own experiences and those of her extended family. As Naylor has stated, “I wanted to become a writer because I felt that my presence as a black woman and my perspective as a woman in general had been underrepresented in American literature.” She received the American Book Award for First Fiction for *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), a novel that was later adapted for television. This success was followed by *Linden Hills* (1985), *Mama Day* (1988), *Bailey’s Cafe* (1993), and *The Men of Brewster Place* (1998). Naylor’s short fiction and essays have appeared widely, and she has also edited *Children of the Night: Best Short Stories by Black Writers, 1967–(1995)*.

More than any other form of prejudiced language, racial slurs are intended to wound and shame. In the following essay, which first appeared in the *New York Times* in 1986, Naylor remembers a time when a third-grade classmate called her a nigger. By examining the ways in which words can take on meaning depending on who uses them and to what purpose, Naylor concludes that “words themselves are innocuous; it is the consensus that gives them true power.”

**WRITING TO DISCOVER:** Have you or someone you know ever been called a derogatory name? Write about how this made you feel.

Language is the subject. It is the written form with which I’ve managed to keep the wolf away from the door and, in diaries, to keep my sanity. In spite of this, I consider the written word inferior to the spoken, and much of the frustration experienced by novelists is the awareness that whatever we manage to capture in even the most transcendent passages falls far short of the richness of life. Dialogue achieves its power in the dynamics of a fleeting moment of sight, sound, smell, and touch.

I’m not going to enter the debate here about whether it is language that shapes reality or vice versa. That battle is doomed to be waged whenever we seek intermittent reprieve from the chicken and egg dispute. I will simply take the position that the spoken word, like the written word, amounts to a nonsensical arrangement of sounds or letters without a consensus that assigns “meaning.” And building from the meanings of