

Dangers of Weaponising Language

Kirpal Singh*, Distinguished Professor

Centre for Educational Leadership at Training Vision Institute, Singapore

ARTICLE INFO

Article history

RECEIVED: 26-Jun-23

REVISED: 05-Nov-23

ACCEPTED: 25-Nov-23

PUBLISHED: 01-Dec-23

*Corresponding Author

Kirpal Singh

E-mail: koxsing@hotmail.com

Citation: Kirpal Singh (2023). Dangers of Weaponising Language. Horizon J. Hum. Soc. Sci. Res. 5 (2), 19–22. <https://doi.org/10.37534/bp.jhssr.2023.v5.n2.id1229.p19>



Crossref
Content

ABSTRACT

This article delves into the intricate interplay between language and society, shedding light on the risks associated with weaponizing language. While inspired by Harbhajan Singh's recent piece on the weaponization of race and religion, this discussion expands the scope to include language as an equally potent force. Language, despite being a remarkable blessing, can also become a curse when wielded recklessly or with partisan intent.

The Enduring Impact of Words

The author highlights the enduring impact of words on individuals, arguing that linguistic wounds often leave deep emotional scars (Singh, 2023). Unlike physical wounds, which tend to heal with time, the hurt inflicted by words lingers in memory, adding to a repository of negative experiences. The author recalls a time when certain derogatory terms, such as "bastard," were legally prohibited due to their implications about a person's legitimacy.

Evolution of Societal Norms

Over the years, societal norms have evolved, and pre-marital pregnancies, once stigmatized, are now more widely accepted as a prelude to marriage (Singh, 2023). This shift in perspective reflects the changing dynamics of human relationships, both in sexual conduct and other aspects of life.

The Role of Language in Conflicts

The article emphasizes that the trio of race, religion, and language requires meticulous handling and responsible discourse (Singh, 2023). Language, in particular, plays a significant role in conflicts, as its usage often labels and categorizes, necessitating careful monitoring. The term "weaponization," as used by Harbhajan Singh, serves as a critical reference, extending beyond race and religion. History is replete with examples of word-related disputes that have ignited quarrels, and even wars, due to the provocative use or misinterpretation of language.

Challenges in Pluralistic Societies

In pluralistic societies, where diverse values and beliefs coexist, these challenges are magnified. Disputes stemming from linguistic controversies are often protracted legal battles, leaving all parties dissatisfied. Politicians, in particular, face substantial risks when language is employed carelessly or with excessive seriousness, as this can trigger emotional reactions and strained relationships.

Responsibility in Language Usage

In conclusion, the article underscores the need for a sensitive and responsible approach to the use of language (Singh, 2023). It encourages thoughtful communication and the avoidance of casual or offensive language. In times of uncertainty, the author recommends turning to dictionaries as a guide for clear and respectful expression. The overarching message is clear: language is a powerful tool, and its impact, whether constructive or destructive, should not be underestimated.

Keywords: Language, weaponization, race, religion, society, linguistic conflicts

In an interesting article in the recent issue of *The Malaysian Review* (June 19-25), my friend Harbhajan Singh wrote tellingly of the risks and dangers associated with “weaponising” race and religion.

To this I should like to add language too.

From time immemorial language has both been a supreme blessing but also a damn curse in terms of what can result when words- even so-called simple words- are deliberately abused or when they become the subject of partisan utilisation.

Most of us have heard- or been told- that wound made by words are hard to heal. And they are because whereas a physical wound that hurts because someone slaps us or gives us a punch tends generally to go away (heal) after a while the hurt/s delivered by words tend to linger in memory- thus adding to the stored negatives which may already lie there just waiting for appropriate provocation.

When I was young in some countries it was against the law to call someone a “bastard” because doing so suggested/ implied that the person so-called was/is illegitimate.

These days many marry - or legalise their unions/ relationships- when they discover that there is a baby conceived. But it is also necessary to acknowledge that unlike in the past- even the recent past-when pregnancy before marriage was severely prohibited and scorned, these days this syndrome has become widespread and often serves as the prelude to marriage. By the same token because sexual activity is these days assumed to be a given among most adults in our communities- even rife among our university students-it is necessary to therefore allow for a kind(er) attitude and acceptance of “accidental” pregnancies- especially among students of tertiary institutions. This, however, does not suggest that pre-marital sex is condoned by all and many bear the serious consequences of bearing guilt and/or also the conceived child.

Societal norms and mores have always been subject to great upheavals even if the majority in any given context adamantly stuck to the “rules of engagement” so to speak. Whether in war or sexual conduct the understandings which underpin human relationships do tend to vary enormously leading, frequently, to a different basis of formal acceptance and/or rejection.

Thus, the attractive trinity of race, religion and language must not only be handled and treated with utmost care and responsibility but it also needs- nay, demands- that honest and scrupulous thinking through prior discussions before publication of any sort (written or verbal or even gestural). From time immemorial it is Language that has most markedly been the bane and basis of countless squabbles and quarrels and wars. This is simply because language labels and brands so its usage has to be carefully monitored.

Expanding the Notion of Weaponization

The reference to “weaponisation” by Harbhajan is absolutely crucial even if his immediate reference was to race and religion. The countless fights that history reveals pertaining to abuse and mis-use of words that connote - deliberately and provocatively or otherwise- is not only a gruesome witness to our human nature of frequently responding/reacting without thinking (hence why these days the need for so-called “due diligence” has become paramount) but also a timely reminder that words are dangerous. And this applies to ALL communications and All communities - much more so- obviously- in our plural societies where values are just one aspect of contentious debate among and between members of different races and religions and languages.

The presence of plurality always poses challenges; often these challenges cannot be resolved by fiat or even by simple legislation. Millions are spent by contending

parties in legal suits that drag sometimes for decades and even when final judgments are passed there is little or no satisfaction either to one party or both or all involved. Politicians expose themselves and their people to serious risks as well as imminent danger if and when people feel that words used have been taken too casually or even too seriously. And sometimes compromise in understanding is extremely difficult and this inevitably results in provoked emotional reactions.

The Role of Dictionaries

Thus the “weaponisation” of language- though not new by any means- must be abided by sensitively and through good disposition. When in doubt- as all my teachers used to advise-please resort to the dictionary.

References

- Singh, H. (June 19-25, 2023). The perils of weaponizing race and religion. *The Malaysian Review*, pp. 5-7.
- Crystal, D. (1997). *English as a Global Language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lakoff, G. (2002). *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*. University of Chicago Press.
- Orwell, G. (1949). 1984. Harcourt, Brace & Co.
- Pinker, S. (2007). *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature*. Viking.
- Sapir, E. (1929). The Status of Linguistics as a Science. *Language*, 5(4), 207-214.
- Trudgill, P. (2010). *Investigating Sociolinguistics*. Routledge.

Biographical Statement of Author

Prof. Kirpal Singh, a Colombo Plan scholar is an internationally respected poet, fictionist, and thinker. For over 20 years he taught English Language and Literature at the National University of Singapore and at the Nanyang Technological University, before being asked to join the Singapore Management University where he taught Creative Thinking.



Professor Kirpal Singh
Director, Centre for Educational
Leadership at TVI, S'pore

He has many books to his credit, including the highly provocative *Thinking Hats & Coloured Turbans: Creativity Across Cultures* (2004) which contributed several original insights into the nature of creativity, especially in terms of language. Kirpal has written and published three collections of poetry and edited many literary journals and books. He was a founding member of the Centre for Research in New Literatures, Flinders University, Australia in 1977, the first Asian director for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1993 and 1994, and chairman of the Singapore Writers' Festival in the 1990s.

Dr. Kirpal is an internationally recognised scholar whose core research areas include post-colonial literature, Singapore and Southeast Asian, literature and technology, and creativity thinking. He has won research awards and grants from local and foreign universities. His research articles and critical writings have been

published in international journals such as *Ariel*, *Diogene*, *Commonwealth Novel In English*, *Literary Criterion*, *Quadrant*, *Southern Review* and *Westerly*. He has written three books of poetry and edited over 15 publications, including the prestigious literary journal, *World Literature Written in English*. He has attended international writers' festivals in Adelaide, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Toronto and Kent, to give readings of his works. He had the distinction of being the first Asian director of the prestigious Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1993 and 1994. In addition, Singh is a member of several international literary journals and associations. Until his retirement in 2017, Kirpal was involved in conceptualising and promoting creative thinking in Singapore's undergraduate education system at the Singapore Management University (SMU). In 2004, Singh became the first Asian and non-American to be made a director on the American Creativity Association's (ACA) board.

Dr. Kirpal is also the first non-American to be elected to the Board of Directors of the American Creativity Association (ACA) where he has served as the Vice-President and Chairman of ACA International since 2006. As the author of more than 150 articles and essays, Kirpal is an authority in several fields of literary endeavour. Currently, he is an esteemed Futurist invited to share his visions of the future with audiences worldwide.

Professor Dr. Kirpal Singh

Director

Centre for Educational Leadership

Training Vision Institute (TVI)

Singapore

E-mail: koxsing@hotmail.com

DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of, and should not be attributed to, the Horizon Journal or the Horizon Editorial Board.

December 2023.