

Racism in Media Language and Law Enforcement Officers' Actions after Hurricane Katrina¹

John R. Rickford
Professor of Linguistics
Stanford University
11/28/05

Racism in Media Language

Although scholars have argued for over a century about the relative extent and directionality of the relation between language, thought and society, there is no question that such a relation exists. The perspective that best accords with my own is that of Norbert Dittmar (in *Sociolinguistics: A Critical Survey of Theory and Application*. London: Edward Arnold, 1976:238) who argues for a bidirectional relationship in which “speech behavior and social behavior are in a state of constant interaction.” Sexism and racism can both be reflected in language (e.g., in the traditional use of *he* and *man* or their equivalents as generics in English and other languages, or in the differential positive/negative associations of *white* and *black*). Language in turn can help to project and perpetuate sexism and racism.

The language of the media in the aftermath of the Hurricane Katrina disaster illustrated this rather well. Stanford Communications Professor Marcyliena Morgan has already drawn your attention to the differential use of “looting” vs. “finding” in newswire captions describing a black person on the one hand, and two white people on the other:

- [Black] A young man walks through chest deep flood water after looting a grocery store [AP newswire Aug 20, 2005, 11:31 am ET]
- [White] Two residents wade through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store (AFP newswire, Aug 30, 2005, 3:47 am ET)

But in addition to Professor Morgan's points about *looting* vs. *finding*, note also the awkwardness of the syntax in the latter case: in English, one never finds something “from” a store, only “in” or “at” a store. “From” indeed collocates more naturally with “loot” or at least “take,” suggesting that one of these verbs may originally have been used when the story was filed, and that an editor may have revised the verb to portray the white protagonists in a more innocent light, while forgetting to change the preposition. Moreover, note that the noun used to characterize the white protagonists (*residents*) has a similar “uplifting” effect. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* explains, the word *resident* means “one who resides permanently in a place, specifically applied to inhabitants of the better class”; and it would be natural to expect that residents, in a crisis, have rights to the resources of their neighborhoods. By contrast, the black youth depicted in the AP photo is characterized as a transient “young man,” without the status or the claim on neighborhood resources that residents would have.

A related example, discussed by Stanford consulting Linguistics professor Geoffrey Nunberg in his “Fresh Air” commentary of September 8, 2005 on national Public Radio, was the use of *evacuee* versus *refugee* to describe the displaced (primarily African American) victims of Hurricane Katrina. When Black leaders objected to the use

¹I was invited to participate in the Oct. 24, 2005 panel on “Media, Culture and the Politics of Representation,” for the *Confronting Katrina* course at Stanford, but was unable to do so because I was out of the country. This is the contribution I had intended to make, taking into account the contributions of the other panelists: Professors Iyengar, Lowery and Morgan.

of *refugee*, with its negative connotations (OED: “one who, owing to religious persecution of political troubles, seeks refuge in a foreign country” or “a runaway; a fugitive from justice (rare)”), Nunberg reported that “some newspapers and wire services ... defended the use of *refugee* as meaning simply someone who seeks refuge.” But the evidence that media use of this term was not neutral came in statistics that Nunberg only published in a footnote to the online version of his commentary (which Fresh Air/NPR listeners may have missed):

In Nexis wire service articles mentioning Katrina over the past week, articles containing “evacuee” outnumber those containing “refugee” by 56% to 44% (n=1522). But in contexts in which the words appear within 10 words of “poor” or “black”, “refugee” is favored by 68% to 32% (n=85). And in contexts in which the words appear within ten words of “Astrodome,” “refugee” is favored by 63% to 37% (n=461). Those disparities no doubt reflect the image of refugees as poor, bedraggled, and forlorn, and they suggest that there’s a genuine basis for the impression that the word tends to single out one group, even if unwittingly. [<http://www-csli.stanford.edu/~nunberg/looting.html>]

Racism in law enforcement officers’ actions

One of the appalling features of the aftermath to Hurricane Katrina is the fact that in several cases, policemen and troopers from whom one might have expected succor and support in fact provided the opposite (violence or the threat of violence), in scenes that reminded us painfully of the days of slavery or the Ku Klux Klan. These cases force us to ask whether we are dealing with institutional racism or individual acts of discrimination (cf. Stanford Business Professor Brian Lowery’s remarks at the Oct. 24, 2004 panel), and whether the behavior of these officials might have been in part a reaction to the impression that the city had degenerated into a state of mayhem (cf. Stanford Communications Professor Shanto Iyengar’s references at the same forum to the frenzied, hyperbolic reporting of unverified “rapes” and “unconfirmed sniper attacks”). I will give only two examples:

- *Newsweek*, Sep. 12, 2005 (pp. 51-2), reported the case of Nicole Williams, a 41-year-old New Orleans mother, who arrived in a bus at the Houston Astrodome with no idea where her two-year old son or other family members were. “They were separated at the I-10 cloverleaf. *When Williams tried to reach for her baby so he could ride on her lap, she says, a state trooper sprayed Mace in her face to keep her from getting off the bus. “They Maced my mother and my daughter,” she said. “Then the door slammed shut.”* [Emphasis added.]
- *Mercury News*, Sep. 10, 2005, from *New York Times* correspondent Gardiner Harris: Police agencies south of New Orleans were so fearful of the crowds attempting to leave the city after Hurricane Katrina that they sealed a crucial bridge over the Mississippi River and turned back hundreds of desperate evacuees, according to two paramedics who were in the crowd. The paramedics and two other witnesses said *officers sometimes shot guns over the heads of fleeing people*. The witnesses said they had been told by New Orleans police to cross this same bridge because buses were waiting for them there. Instead, a suburban police officer angrily ordered about 200 people to abandon an encampment between the highways near the bridge. *The officer then confiscated their food and water...* The police kept saying, ‘We don’t want another SuperDome,’ and ‘This isn’t New Orleans’... [Emphasis added]

