Donald Trump, Adolf Hitler and the Naming of the Shrew

On Abusive Influence on the Language of Science by Political Leadership

LARS ENGELMANN

On March 3, 1942 Adolf Hitler read a newspaper article in the Berliner Morgenpost which agitated him. He ordered Martin Bormann, head of the Nazi Party's head office, one of Hitler's most trusted deputies and unofficially the second most powerful man in Germany at the time, to write the following letter to the chief of the Reich Chancellery Hans Lammers:

> In yesterday's paper, the Fuhrer read a note about the fifteenth general meeting of the Society for Mammalian Biology and the renamings the society decided on.[1] Thereupon, the Fuhrer ordered me to inform the responsible people with desirable clarity that these changes have to be revoked immediately. If the members of the Society for Mammalian Biology are not able to do something more essential to the war effort or something smarter, they could perhaps be put to use at a working battalion at the Russian front. If another feeble-minded renaming like this occurred again, the Fuhrer would take action accordingly. Terms, which have been used for years, are not to be changed in this manner. (Bormann; translation mine)

What did the German Society for Mammalian Biology decide on that caught the attention of Adolf Hitler in the middle of World War II? They renamed shrews and bats. In German, shrews are called *Spitzmaus* and bats are called *Fledermaus*. These are compound nouns. *Spitzmaus* is formed by joining the adjective spitz and the noun Maus. *Spitz* can be translated to pointed, which refers to the animal's nose. *Maus* translates to mouse. *Fledermaus* is a bit more complicated. The first part of the compound is a word that is no longer used on its own in the German language. The Origin of *Fledermaus* can be traced back to the eighth century, when it was written *fledarmūs*, whereas *fledar* relates to *flattern*, a verb that translates to *to flutter* (Kluge 301, 300). According to *Berliner Morgenpost*, the members of the Society for Mammalian Biology decided to change the name of bats to *Fleder* and call shrews *Spitzer* (qtd. in Hutterer).

The reason for renaming these animals lies in the linguistic component they have in common: *Maus*. Neither of the two animals is biologically a mouse. The risk of mistaking a bat for a mouse is relatively low, due to its ability to fly. Bats belong to their own order called *Chiroptera*. With shrews, this risk of falsely identifying them as mice is a lot bigger. They share a habitat with and have a similar appearance to mice, hence it is easy to mistake one for the other. Most Germans probably believe they actually belong to the same family. Taxonomists classify shrews as *Eulipotyphla*, which are also called *Insectivora* – animals which feed almost exclusively on insects. According to this taxonomy, shrews are more closely related to hedgehogs and moles than to mice (Beck et al.). This is the reason German scientists in 1942 decided to abandon the term *Spitzmaus*: it is scientifically inaccurate and leads to misunderstandings. After the members of the Society for Mammalian Biology received Hitler's threat to be deported to Russia and be forced to work for the military, they revoked the name changes.

Hitler's successful attempt to prevent the application of a less misleading and more

1 Actually, it was the 16th general meeting. The number 15 was falsely attributed by the editor of Berliner Morgenpost, who wrote the aforementioned article. See: Hutterer.

scientifically accurate term for shrews in German is an example of how the abuse of power can shape scientific discourse and subsequently the perception of reality. Even today, the shrew is still called *Spitzmaus* in Germany and many people mistake shrews for mice.

MICHEL FOUCAULT AND FALLING SNOW

The famous anecdote about the unusually large amount of words for snow in Eskimo languages like Yupik or Inuit is based on a misread paragraph in the Handbook of American Indian Languages by Franz Boas from 1911. Boas, notably a linguist and anthropologist, was writing about the ties between different forms of word formation and culture. He compared English and "Eskimo" words for different kinds of snow.[2] While at least one compound of every example Boas gave for English was the word *snow*, the equivalent words in "Eskimo" were very different from each other. He compared *aput* to snow on the ground, *qana* to falling snow and *qimuqsuq* to snowdrift. Boas did not make any assumptions on the quantity of words for a specific phenomenon in either language. He simply determined that different languages use different kinds of word formation (Boas 25–26). The examples above are simply a display of disassociated vocabulary. This did not stop Benjamin Lee Whorf, one of the most influential and prominent linguists of the twentieth century, from repeating the myth in his article Science and Linguistics. He wrote:

> This class [of a noun, used by the Hopi, which includes everything that flies except birds] seems to us too large and inclusive, but so would our class 'snow' to an Eskimo. We have the same word for falling snow, snow on the ground, snow packed hard like ice, slushy snow, wind-driven flying snow – whatever the situation may be. To an Eskimo, this all-inclusive word would be almost unthinkable; he would say that falling snow, slushy snow, and so on, are sensuously and operationally different, different things to contend with; he uses different words for them and for other kinds of snow. (Whorf 8)

Whorf was advocating a theory that proposes a strong relationship between language and thought. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis states that linguistic categories like grammar and lexicon determine a person's worldview. This principle is also called linguistic relativity. The most extreme interpretation of Whorf's views on language and psychology, linguistic determinism, has since been dismissed by linguists like Noam Chomsky, who introduced the theory of Generative Grammar. This theory proposes that language and linguistic structures are innate in every human being (Chomsky 3–207). Up until today, there is no clear winner in the great debate about nurture vs. nature in linguistics. There is, however, empirical evidence for a middle ground, a weaker stance on the relationship between language and cognition that acknowledges aspects of Generative Grammar but claims that language is also able to influence perception (Meteyard et al. 1007–1013; Lupyan 300). For example, most languages use relative and absolute systems of directions alongside each other. English knows left, right, up and down as well as north, south, west and east. The Aboriginal people Thaayoree in Queensland, Australia speak Kuuk Thaayore, and this language has only absolute directions (Gaby 54).

Power, knowledge and language form a triangular relationship in which one influences the other two.

If language measurably affects cognitive processes and perception, this can have severe consequences. Power, knowledge and language form a triangular relationship in which one influences the other two. Michel Foucault proposes this link in his writings about discourse,

2 Although Boas uses the term "Eskimo" as a term for a language, it is an inaccurate designation. He either mistook the languages of the Eskimo-Aleut family native to northern America, Greenland and eastern Siberia as one or is referring to said language family by using an unusual term.

most notably in his books *Archaeology of Knowledge*, *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*. The term discourse is used in many different contexts and with very different concepts in mind. Foucault himself provides three definitions:

> Lastly, instead of gradually reducing the rather fluctuating meaning of the word 'discourse', I believe that I have in fact added to its meanings: treating it sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a certain number of statements. (Foucault 80)

The first definition is very broad: "the general domain of all statements" refers to any statement ever made. Parameters seem necessary to limit the term. Criteria could be geographical, social or political and limitations to a specific period of time are also applicable. This results in the second definition: "an individualizable group of statements" which, when applied, produces different kinds of discourse, like a discourse of masculinity or a discourse of colonialism. The third definition adds explicit rules to the concept: "a regulated practice which accounts for a number of statements". These definitions are often used interchangeably and in an overlapping way (Mills 7). Discourse is then the concept of what is said, what can be said and by whom. The set of acceptable utterances is always limited by societal restrictions like morality and other conventions. Sciences apply their own conventions on language. These conventions can differ between fields and schools of thought. While there are power structures within sciences (Collins 165–186), these conventions are usually a result of the internal discourse of a field. When political leaders use their influence to change or limit these conventions and, therefore, the scientific discourse from outside a field by force, this can be considered an abuse of power.

DONALD TRUMP AND ENTITLEMENT

On December 15, 2017 *The Washington Post* reported on a "ban" of certain words Donald Trump's administration allegedly imposed on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). According to the article, Alison Kelly, a senior leader in the CDC's Office of Financial Resources, told officials of the agency who oversee budget issues to stop using the terms vulnerable, entitlement, diversity, transgender, fetus, evidence-based and science-based in budget documents, which are to be handed to partners of the CDC and Congress (Sun and Eileperin). As *The New York Times* reported a day later, the policy probably originated with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and was not a strict ban, but technically a suggestion. Kelly allegedly said that including these words in a budget proposal would lessen the chances of getting approval for said proposal (Kaplan and McNeil).

In this case, the argument could be made that the political leadership of the United States of America did not abuse its power to alter the language of scientific research and thereby change scientific discourse for political reasons by force. First of all, this is not an explicit ban on certain words. It is a suggestion, advising that avoiding these terms could help with the funding of projects. Secondly, this suggestion is only to be applied to budget documents, not to scientific research papers. Finally, this policy is only relevant to the CDC, a governmental institution, not the whole field of biology and medicine.

On the other hand, a suggestion that is backed up by monetary dependencies is slightly more than a suggestion. Scientists will have to avoid these words on the list of the HHS to be able to work. It is not important if the absence of certain language is due to an explicit ban or an implicit one. Avoiding certain terms on budget documents can lead to alterations in the scientific research. If scientists wanted to specifically research health issues of transgender people, they would have to become creative to avoid the term transgender in their budget documents. The Zika virus mostly af-

fects fetuses, so what term is to be used when proposing research into the virus? Researchers might be able to get funding for their project, but only by changing the focus or scope of their research. Lastly, the CDC has a budget of $5.66 Billion in the 2019 fiscal year (CDC-Budget Request Overview). This is a lot of money spent on medical research. The implicit restrictions by the HHS affect how and on which research projects this money is spent. The CDC often deals with basic research other scientists can build on. Therefore, this "ban" indirectly affects not only the CDC and its partners, but the scientific community as a whole.

In fact, this case seems to be a prime example of a disruption of scientific discourse. The necessity to avoid certain terms to be able to get funding for research is a manifestation of discourse as the absence of certain words can alter the perception of issues. In this case, a conservative Republican government decides whether terminology is appropriate, rather than scientists. If members of Congress never read proposals about research into the health of transgender people, they probably will not be concerned about these issues. The HHS altered the language of scientists of the CDC, which will affect the perception of reality of members of Congress, who subsequently may pass different kinds of regulation and therefore alter the reality of many people.

LANGUAGE AND POWER

Knowledge, power and language have a strong relationship. The power of political leadership can alter scientific discourse. Even small instances of abuse of this power can influence people's perception of the world. In Germany, the shrew is still widely considered a mouse due to the abuse of power by Adolf Hitler. Donald Trump did not write an angry letter (or a tweet, for that matter) proposing to deport scientists of the CDC to an Iraqi military camp, but his actions could still implicitly alter the discourse of science. It is too early to tell which consequences his actions will have, but it is not unusual that discourse outside of science influences the discourse of science. After all, science and scientists are part of society and influenced by societal circumstances. In the two anecdotes presented, political leadership explicitly imposed their own discourse onto the scientific discourse. The methods and the language used by the Republican government of the United States of America to influence scientific discourse may be less aggressive than Hitler's intervention in the renaming of the shrew, but the consequences might be much more severe.

WORKS CITED

Beck, Robin, et al. "A Higher-Level MRP Supertree of Placental Mammals." *BMC Evolutionary Biology*, vol. 6, 2006.

Boas, Franz. *Handbook of American Indian Languages*. Bureau of American Ethnology, 1911.

Bormann, Martin. "4.3.1942 Bormann an Lammers, mit Zeitungsausschnitt Berliner Morgen post." *Die Rückseite des Hakenkreuzes*, edited by Beatrice Heiber and Helmut Heiber, Deutscher Taschenbuchverlag,2001, pp. 244–245.

"CDC-Budget Request Overview." CDC: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. https://www.cdc.gov/budget/documents/fy2019/cdc-overview-factsheet.pdf. Accessed 29 March 2018.

Chomsky, Noam. *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. The MIT Press, 1964.

Collins, Harry. "The TEA Set. Tacit Knowledge and Scientific Networks". *Science Studies*, vol. 4, 1974, pp. 165–186.

Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. Pantheon Books, 1972.

Gaby, Alice. “The Thaayoree Think of Time Like They Talk of Space”. *Frontiers in Psychology,* vol. 3, 2012. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3428806/. Acces sed 12 March 2018.

Hutterer, Rainer. “Berlin und die Deutsche Gesell schaft für Säugetierkunde.” *Bongo*, vol. 31, 2001, pp. 97–120. Mammalian Biology. Zeit schrift für Säugetierkunde, http://www.mammalianbiology.org/DGS-Geschichte(Hutterer-2001).pdf. Accessed 7 March 2018.

Kaplan, Sheila and Donald G. McNeil Jr. “Uproar Over Purported Ban at C.D.C. of Words Like ‘Fetus’.” *The New York Times,* December16, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/16/health/cdc-trump-banned-words.html. Accessed 11 November 2018.

Kluge, Friedrich. *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, 25th ed. De Gruyter, 2011.

Lupyan, Gary. “Linguistically Modulated Perception and Cognition. The Label-Feedback Hypothesis”. *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 3, 2012. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3297074/. Accessed 11 March 2018.

Meteyard, Lotte, et al. “Motion Detection and Motion Verbs. Language Affects Low-Level Visual Perception.” *Psychological Science,* vol. 18, no. 11, 2007, pp. 1007–1013.

Mills, Sara. *Discourse*. Routledge, 1997.

“Nicht mehr Fledermaus!” *Berliner Morgenpost*. Deutscher Verlag, 03.03.1942.

Sun, Lena and Juliet Eilperin. “CDC gets list of forbidden words: Fetus, trangsgender, diversity”. *The Washington Post*, 12.15.2017. https:// www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/cdc-gets-list-of-forbidden-words-fetus-transgender-diversity/2017/12/15/f503837a-e1cf-11e7-89e8edec16379010_story.html Accesed on 11 November 2018.

Whorf, Benjamin Lee. “Science and Linguistics.” *Technology Review*, vol. 44, no. 6, 1940, pp. 229–231, 247–248. MIT. http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/whorf.scienceandlinguistics.pdf. Accessed 14 March 2018.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lars Engelmann is currently studying English and German in the joint BA degree at WWU Münster with a focus on spoken language and the prospect of studying Applied Linguistics in the near future. He has an academic background in biology and is interested in a wide range of topics including psychology, the philosophy and sociology of science, scientific myths and historical anecdotes. The interdisciplinary research presented in this essay is a result of the course “Introduction to the Sociology of Science” in Winter 2017/2018. Lars Engelmann is the founder of *famoseworte.de* and former head writer of the 2016 Grimme Online Award nominee *Puerto Patida*.