Chapter 4
The Power of Words:
A Preliminary Critical Analysis of Concepts Used in Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences

Yvette D. Hyter

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6910-8576
Western Michigan University, USA

ABSTRACT

Recently, speech, language, and hearing sciences (SLHS) programs became increasingly aware of structural racism, inequity, and injustice in the professions and world. Although a consistent experience for many people of color, this current reality requires scholars and educators to interrogate concepts and employ more transformative concepts fitting for this new era. Concepts are the basis of thought, essential for communication, necessary for building knowledge, and the building blocks of theory. Critical theory was used to conduct a preliminary analysis of five concepts used in SLHS. The concepts were analyzed keeping in mind the historical, political, and cultural influences on how the concepts are used and understood in SLHS. The analysis revealed that these concepts were typically not defined in SLHS literature, and without collective critical reflection, the continued use of those concepts could lead to inequities and/or exclusion. Suggestions for more equitable concepts are provided.

INTRODUCTION

Children in the 1960s often sang a rhyme - "*Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me*." This rhyme was used to let people know that if they called a person a bad name or bullied a person with words, that person would be able to shirk it off and go on with life, unaffected. It is common knowledge now that the words in that little rhyme ring hollow. Words, and more importantly the concepts or underlying meanings of words, are powerful. Two different words can refer to the same concept, such as *Ναί* in Greek and *Si* in Spanish. Although these words are different, they express the same concept - agreement or affirmation (e.g., *yes* in English).

Concepts are important in thinking, communicating, learning, and in theory building and imple-mentation (Giddens et al., 2020). Without concepts humans would not be able to communicate ideas with others. Also, concepts provide a link between thinking and behaviors. The meanings (underlying concepts) that we have for things, drives how one behaves or acts toward those things (see Hamilton et al., 2018 as an example). Let's review two concepts (*riot* versus *rebellion* [or insurrection]) that will be helpful in understanding the impact that the underlying meaning of concepts have on behavior. Gener-ally, both are considered a response by the populace to an injustice, perceived or real, committed by an authority such as the government. Riot is typically perceived to be a disorganized violent outburst that is not a legitimate form of expression. The media typically labels rebellions initiated by people of color as riots and the police respond with extreme violence and suppression. The riot that took place on 6 January 2021 in the U. S. at the U. S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., by mostly white people was labeled by the media as an insurrection – a legitimate form of expression. The police response was a much kinder, gentler, non-violent response to the 6th January event when compared to the police response to the largely organized and peaceful protests of groups that are comprised of primarily people of color.

Concepts are not understandable in isolation. They "must be related to contexts such as theories, discourses or speech communities" (Risjord, 2009, p. 685). To fully understand concepts, it is necessary to determine how they are used in a particular context (Risjord, 2009; Wittgenstein, 1953). When the context changes the concept's underlying meaning also changes (Risjord, 2009; Rodgers, 1989; 2000). For example, in linguistics and speech, language and hearing sciences, the concept used to refer to a language variation spoken by many (but not all) African Americans has changed in concert with changes in the social and political context. Such concepts have included Negro dialect, American Negro speech, Black English, African American vernacular English, and African American English (Green, 2002).

Concepts are also an essential component of learning and implementing what is learned across diverse contexts (Giddens et al., 2020). The power that concepts hold is dependent on the systems/ social structures that maintain the inherent meaning of those concepts. For example, a racialized slur is meaningless without the history of systemic racism and racialized exploitation, oppression, and exclu-sion (Santiago-Valles, 2019).

The objectives of this chapter are to:

1. Identify five concepts used in SLHP that have outlived their usefulness for the time in which we are living
2. Critically analyze those five concepts, and explain how their continued use can oppress and exclude members of the SLHP discipline
3. Argue that SLHPs need transformative concepts, and without these concepts we will be relegated to policies and practices that continue to exploit, oppress and exclude people of color in the discipline.

Before discussing the background, methodology and results of the study, it is important to inform the reader of my positionality with regard to the topic and the research methodology. A positionality statement is an explanation of the researcher's perspectives or lenses with regard to the research process and interpretation of the data, and how these perspectives may have influenced the research process and interpretation (Gary & Holmes, 2020).

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