HOW WORDS REALLY CAN HURT

Attributions of Blame in Gender Violence and the Mass Media

BY LESLIE M. SCHWARTZ

The power communication has over how meaning is created and transmitted in society is indisputable—language contributes to decisions we make, opinions we form, stories we believe, attributions we assign, and perceptions we internalize. Because of the substantial influence that language has on these areas of social life, it is essential to critically examine how language functions in the mass media in order to discuss possible implications communication has on audiences and the perceptions, opinions, and attributions they form about gender violence in our society.

From a linguistic perspective, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis illustrates that "human beings do not live in the objective world alone, [and] are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society….We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation" (Sapir, 1929). Here, Sapir defines language as a social medium of expression that influences our choices and interpretations of reality within given contexts. Whorf (1940) further describes our world as "a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds—and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds." Both of these conceptions relate to the influence language has in our given social structure to mold and shape the version of reality we perceive, illustrating the powerful impact language has on constructing individual ideas of social reality.

While the average media consumer seldom considers the semantic structure of newspaper articles or broadcast news reports, the way these messages are communicated to readers and viewers has the potential to impact our worldview and perceptions of reality. Cultural Studies scholar and UCLA professor, Douglas Kellner (2003) reports that "media images help shape our view of the world and our deepest values….Media stories provide the symbols, myths, and resources through

which we constitute a common culture and through the appropriation of which we insert ourselves into the culture"(9). Therefore, the tremendous socializing role the mass media plays on all of our lives must be examined actively and considered when we begin to deconstruct how we make decisions and attributions on a daily basis.

More specifically, how the media portrays cases of violence against women through the construction of language oftentimes shifts the agency in the sentence when the passive voice is used in place of an active construction. One of the main byproducts of converting a sentence that is originally written in active voice to passive voice is the change in emphasis of the subject and verb. The verb voice used in sentence constructions determines where the focus and action in the sentence is placed based on who/what is the agent; in passive construction, the subject is acted upon or receives the action expressed in the verb, whereas the subject performs the action in sentences written in active voice.

Because of this, using passive construction is especially problematic when reporting on cases of gender violence when the perpetrator (agent) is unknown. Based on a comprehensive textual and content analysis of eighty-six newspaper articles from the Los Angeles Times and the Denver Post between 2000 and 2005, I found that the pervasive trend in shifting active to passive voice, and even eliminating the agent clause altogether, occurred in a majority of cases. Instead of reporting that "an unknown perpetrator raped a woman last night" (active voice), reporters generally wrote, "A woman was raped last night (by whom?)" (passive voice), leaving off the attributional "agent clause." Feminist linguist, Julia Penelope (1990), argues that "the rhetorical reasons for the popularity of the passive are obvious: remove the agent, shift the hearer/reader's focus to the victim" (146). This function of the passive makes it commonly used as a responsibility mitigating device that works "to suppress reference to the agents who commit specific acts, particularly when the speaker/writer wishes to deny or cover up responsibility" (144).

Therefore, when passive construction is used in reporting cases of gender violence, the related implications for attribution of blame toward the victim instead of the perpetrator are obvious. The effect of truncating the sentence to eliminate the agent altogether shifts the focus to the "object" of the crime (the victim), while changing the information readers receive by migrating responsibility again to the object instead of the subject. In the previous example, when the victim is moved into the role of "subject" in passive voice, the perpetrator oftentimes is left off altogether, begging the question "by whom?" Readers are left to make conscious and even subconscious attributions of blame.

This semiotic shift from active to passive construction has the potential to normalize and perpetuate the notion that the crime was the victim's fault by removing the blame from the perpetrator. Penelope further argues that, "passives without agents foreground the object (victims) in our minds so that we tend to forget that some human agent is responsible for performing the action" (146). Potential impacts of using agentless construction include ambiguity due to excluding the

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subject, as well as the ability to influence reader perceptions and opinions formed about the incident by the information provided and the language used.

Furthermore, UCLA psychology researchers, Henley, Miller, and Beazley (1995), believe that "how people interpret a message may depend, in part, on the verb voice used to phrase that message; such an effect would represent an interaction between syntax, or structure, and semantics, or meaning" (60). The idea that verb voice influences how readers comprehend causal roles of actors within a sentence suggests that "verb voice differentially biases readers and hearers toward seeing the subject or object of a sentence as the primary actor" (61-62). Similarly, a Harvard study by Brown and Fish (1983) shows that "certain facts about English morphology predict certain ways of thinking about causality."

Overall, it is important to critically consider the influence language has over our thoughts, perceptions, and attributions of events, especially relating to gender violence and how it is presented in the mass media. Do both active and passive construction convey the same view of reality to readers? Are the perceptions, opinions, and attributions synonymous for both types of grammatical construction? What ideological messages are upheld by each type of sentence construction? And do journalists even recognize that they are using this type of construction to report on cases of gender violence?

In a society that is continually a victim to the pervasive nature and influential power of the mass media, we can do our part as aware media consumers by taking an active approach through Critical Media Literacy in order to understand and analyze how these linguistic patterns perpetuate dangerous notions of social reality. It is through this recognition and active process of deconstructing media messages that we can begin to understand the full effects of language and its power to shape our worldviews in order to advocate for positive social change.

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