

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Word drift, echo chambers and polarization

Identity politics contributes to our divided nation. Word meaning drift and thoughtless echoing amplifies the problem.

As the world seems more divided, one of the rarely considered reasons is that people using the same words may have a different understanding of what they are saying. An example is “populist”, which a hundred years ago meant a socialistic approach to life and politics but now is used to shrug off anyone with a following who espouses popular ideas (vide infra).

So we have groups slurring each other by using the same words but which have different connotations to each other while acceptability of terminology can change quickly. Small wonder we're in trouble. A change in the meaning of a word used to take centuries. For example, Publius Quinctilius Varus, the Roman General who had knock-knees and lent his name to that condition. In modern Orthopedics, the knock-knee is called “genu valgus” and the opposite (bow-legged) is “genu varus!” That switch took a couple of millennia. But now with the yammering of social media these drifts occur faster.

Social media has given an electronic megaphone to extremists and crack-pots who 40 years ago were confined to standing on a soapbox in a city's speaker's corner with a smattering of casual listeners. One or two loafers might be taking in whatever baloney (usually about the Pope or the prime minister) was dished out. It was hard work with limited success, but now, as Paul Kedroska, a business journalist wrote in 2001: “There's a sucker born every minute, and given the internet, you can reach 'em all with one click.”



Social media has given an electronic megaphone to extremists and crack-pots who 40 years ago were confined to standing on a soapbox in a city's speaker's corner. (Photo credit: Vicki Hamilton, Pixabay.com)

Here are words and phrases (and cliches) that have been evolving in the last 10 years:

Wellness

“How’re YOU,” said an acquaintance – (emphasis on “YOU.”)

“I’m well, thanks,” I said. “And how are things with you?”

“I’m good,” she said.

“I know you’re good but are you well?” I said. (No, I didn’t say that, but am always tempted when someone tells me they’re good).

I know of only three things that enhance wellbeing: exercise, diet and inner contemplation. But now that the feeling of wellbeing has crept into the lexicon as a “ness” word – a proper noun in full serving marching order known as “wellness” – it has an edge to it, and has taken on added physical baggage and dropped the spiritual and comforting nuance of wellbeing.

Wellbeing has been hi-jacked by commercial enterprises from Gwyneth Paltrow to Johnson & Johnson. Ms Paltrow prevents breast cancer by ridding the world of bras and peeps up vaginal tone by inserting her smooth, pricey crystal eggs – a benefit difficult to independently verify. The “penis facial” is a beauty practice that Cate Blanchett and Sandra Bullock profess to using. Part of this “treatment” uses skin cells [taken from Korean newborn baby foreskin](#) and, [according to the Cate](#), smells not unlike sperm.

They, and J&J, have discovered the magic of the placebo effect where 20-30% of the population – male or female – will have a beneficial sense of wellbeing – sorry, wellness – if anything is peddled enthusiastically and often enough. In medicine we tend to ignore the placebo effect but magnify the nocebo effect: for example, the interesting finding in the NSABP’s Tamoxifen Breast Cancer Prevention trial where 45.7% of the women on Tamoxifen had a significant increase in hot flashes – but 28.7% on the placebo pill also reported significant increases in hot flashes.

Wellness culture has grown globally to a \$2 trillion business and often rides on the coat-tails of plodding science. By the way, co-enzyme NAD+ infusions to revitalize cells and organs is pretty clear-cut and proven, and if you believe that, I can provide you with addresses and numbers.

On, of, or around the planet

A substitute for the ancient word “world” (encompassing the globe, its people and much more) or “Earth.” Using “planet” the speaker signals they are thinking big, and are familiar with climate sciences, the environment and atmospheric physics, and like saying “tar sands” they have a commitment to tackling climate change vigorously.

Nation

I used to think I knew what this word meant, but no longer. I thought it was simply a political entity, the whole people of a country, but I am wrong. Back in the 16th and 17th century it often meant a family, kindred, a clan or tribe or even a collection of

university students. So the use of the word to describe Quebec or an Indigenous grouping is merely a movement back in time.

Treason

Formerly the most serious of crimes – an act of endangering the defence of the realm or promoting acts of sabotage to the realm. Punishment was always the death penalty. Now, it's still a fairly serious charge, but seems to have become an act of disloyalty that may require legal charges and counselling but with the right of return to Canada with follow-up observation to ensure good behaviour.

Accountability

A liability to be called to account. But now mostly used by someone seeking to blame another person or group.

Populist

This word has done a 180-degree turn. In the early 20th century it meant an adherent to the ideas of public control of companies, limited private land ownership, increased issue of paper money and a graduated income tax. It now seems to be a slur: a politician pandering to his/her base, usually conservative (e.g. Pierre Poilievre is frequently described by the Toronto Star as a populist).

Special military operation

Thanks to Putin, no longer will there be war. But during the “first and second planetary military operations” there were many examples of old-fashioned troop movements, gun firing and soldiers dying unnecessarily because it was called “war”. But Putin is having a harder time labelling Ukrainians as Neo-Nazis since it's painfully easy to see who the real Neo-Nazis are.

Polarizing

The angle of incidence at which the maximum polarization of light takes place. It's a useful metaphor for divisive political behaviour, but now running the risk of exaggerating merely a difference of viewpoints.

Discussion and conversation

Conversation used to be something informal, between friends or acquaintances. A discussion had a more organized, structured format, held between a variety of people usually leading to some mutually agreed conclusion. Now, you hear “conversations” occurring where “discussions” ruled. It's all part of the artificial mateyness of companies, departments and organizations. Don't be deceived. Life is still tough and comments that can be made in an old-style conversation are best avoided.

Meme

A fashionable word recently fabricated in social media to show you are hip and open to losing big money by investing in “meme stocks” (e.g. “Gamestop” now trading at US\$20 but having been memed up to US\$180). Sell while there’s still time. The company has yet to make remotely near a profit. Who and why are these investors investing? *The Economist* thinks it’s boredom due to lockdowns and too much free cash. I’d add stupidity. Cryptocurrencies also are kissing cousins to meme stocks – cryptos (useful only to hide ill-gotten gains) are an idea whose time should never have come, though central banks might use them.

Moving forward

This platitude is committee lingo for inculcating the idea that what you have been wasting time discussing (or conversing) is about to be developed into action in the near future. This rarely happens.

Skyrocket

This word has become such a cliché I’m surprised it’s still used – but it is – usually by business and financial journalists to describe a sizeable increase in prices, inflation, costs, the stock-market, rents, or salaries. It is so frequently used it should elicit no more than a yawn from the reader.

Like, you know, awesome, no brainer

Try counting the times a speaker uses “like” – you’ll find it’s a better use of time than listening to what ... like ... they’re saying.

I feel that

Kids from 20 – 50 years old no longer say “I think that ...” It’s now “I feel that ...” This may be due to the current pre-eminence of emotional intelligence rather than rational intelligence. It does seem to give the feeler an aura of having considered all aspects of their pronouncement and their expressed thought is now further clad with sensory armour.

Smart

Used in connection with phones, watches and kitchen equipment. This is a chic term for fancy, technologically advanced. Despite some enthusiasts’ beliefs it does not imply intelligence.

Some cliches to put to rest:

My heart goes out to

No, it doesn’t. You’re just saying that, you fake.

All the tools in the toolbox

Said by people who have rarely used tools in a toolbox. Real tool guys know you never use all the tools in the toolbox for any specific job.

Moving the needle

Here the implication is of an epic journey (using a compass) and a superhuman effort to achieve a difficult end. On achieving a needle movement, an Order of Canada is awarded (provided a sizeable donation in time or cash to the current governing party is made).

Following the science

Used by politicians who are not following the science.

No stone unturned

Bureaucratic jargon for doing nothing.

Build back better

Spend lots of taxpayers' money.

Good luck navigating the neo-lexicon with its nuances and drifts meant to polarize you.

Editor's note:

The views, perspectives and opinions in this article are solely the author's and do not necessarily represent those of the AMA.

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