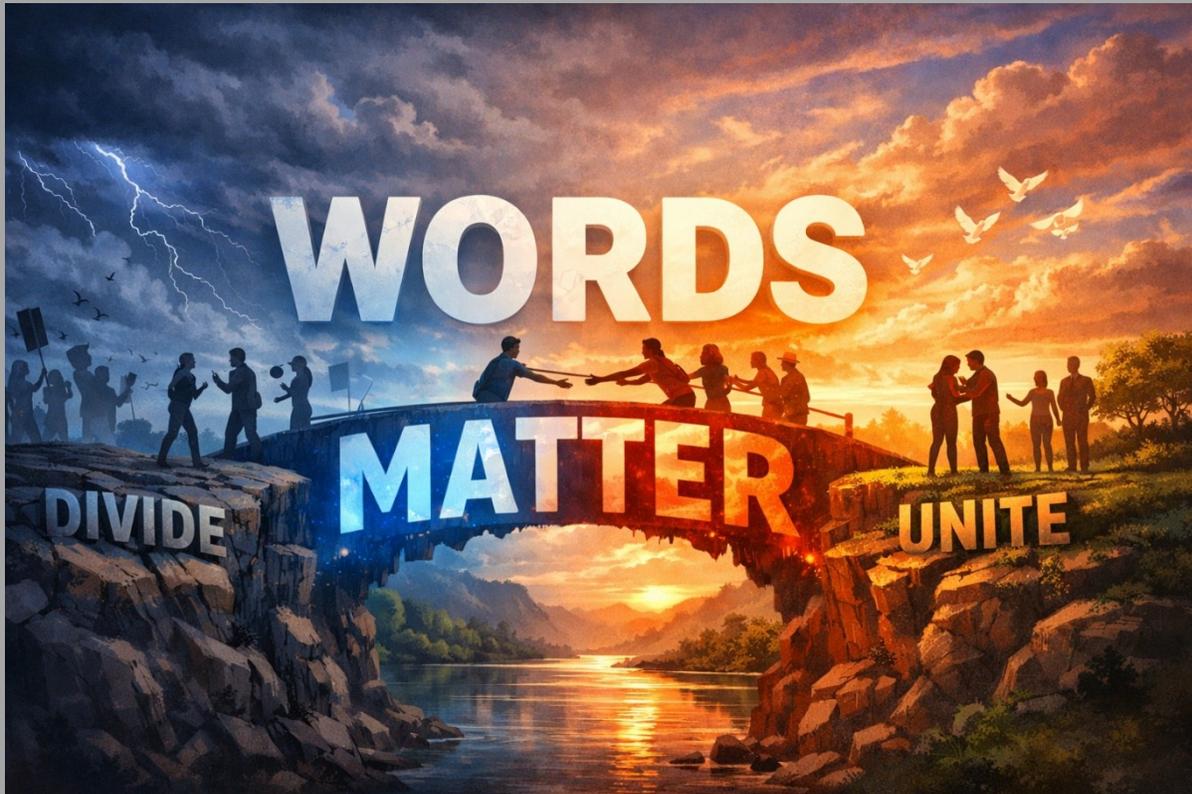


Words Matter: The Psychology of Linguistic Drift



Dr. Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.

I have always loved words, their roots, their history, the way a single syllable can reshape meaning. Words are not merely tools for communication. They are instruments of perception. They guide what we feel safe noticing and what we quietly learn to ignore.

Language always evolves. That is not the concern. The deeper question is whether evolving language clarifies reality or anesthetizes our response to it.

Across cultures and across history, vocabulary has often changed before moral imagination changed. The shift is rarely loud. It comes through softened phrasing, clinical terminology, and compassionate reframing. Over time, what once startled the conscience begins to feel ordinary.

A Personal Disclaimer: Language Shapes Me Too

As I reflect on the power of words, I have to acknowledge something uncomfortable. I am not standing outside this phenomenon. I too have felt the pull of language, sometimes choosing words that were sharper than necessary, sometimes reacting before slowing down enough to see nuance. This essay is not written from a place of moral standard or superiority. It comes from someone who is still learning.

I am learning to slow down, to examine words more carefully, including my own, and to hold conviction and even accountability alongside curiosity. The same psychological forces I describe here shape me as well. Framing, labeling, the desire to belong, and the temptation to speak in absolutes all live within me.

NeuroFaith® reminds me that language can both inflame and anesthetize the nervous system. At times I have spoken from sympathetic urgency. At other times I have retreated into certainty simply because it felt safer. This reflection is not a verdict handed down from a distance. It is an invitation, first to myself and then to others, to speak with greater clarity, greater humility, and a deeper awareness of how words shape not only culture but our own hearts.

The Psychology of Drift

Social psychology shows that human beings do not encounter reality neutrally. We encounter it through frames, linguistic lenses that highlight certain meanings while muting others.

Researchers studying framing effects have demonstrated that identical information evokes different reactions depending on wording. Clinical psychology adds another layer. Euphemistic language can facilitate moral disengagement by reducing emotional resistance through softened phrasing.

Labeling theory reminds us that words do more than describe people. They shape identity and expectation. Once a label becomes dominant, it reorganizes perception itself.

This is how cultural drift happens. First language changes. Then emotion changes. Then moral perception changes.

Incremental Change and the Human Mind

Major cultural transformations rarely begin with shocking declarations. They begin with small shifts in vocabulary that feel compassionate, professional, or reasonable.

Psychologists call this the foot in the door effect. Social norms reinforce the process. People begin to speak differently not only because they agree, but because belonging requires it.

Silence from dissenters can create pluralistic ignorance, the illusion that everyone agrees even when many privately hesitate. Vocabulary becomes a signal of moral membership. Speak the right words and you belong. Speak the wrong words and you risk exclusion.

Language, in this sense, becomes a nervous system strategy for staying connected.

History's Lessons: Euphemism and Power

History reminds us that linguistic softening is not unique to any one era or ideology.

Nazi bureaucrats spoke of a Final Solution rather than genocide. Soviet authorities used phrases like corrective labor. Maoist campaigns referred to purges as rectification. Governments across political systems speak of collateral damage, and corporations speak of right sizing.

The purpose of these examples is not partisan accusation. It is anthropological observation. Human systems often rename difficult realities to reduce emotional resistance.

Hegemony and the Battle Over Words

Some modern thinkers describe this phenomenon through the concept of hegemony, the invisible power of cultural narratives to define what feels normal or compassionate.

Ironically, movements that seek to dismantle dominant narratives often create new linguistic boundaries of their own. Vocabulary becomes socially regulated. Supporters argue that evolving language reduces stigma and expands empathy. Critics worry that euphemism can become moral buffering, a way of approaching difficult realities without fully feeling their weight.

The deeper struggle is often not over policy, but over which words define reality.

Pandemic Language and Contested Narratives

The COVID era made the power of language unmistakable. Terms such as misinformation, following the science, essential, and non-essential became moral signals as much as descriptive phrases.

Debate over the origins of the virus remains contested. Some researchers argue that evidence supporting a lab related origin deserves serious attention. Others maintain that natural spillover remains plausible and that definitive conclusions remain elusive. What became clear was that vocabulary itself shaped which questions felt acceptable to ask.

In times of fear, societies regulate not only behavior but speech. Words become boundaries, markers of safety, responsibility, or risk.

Medicine, Abortion, and the Language of Moral Distance

Few issues demonstrate the emotional power of words more clearly than abortion.

Terms such as termination, reproductive care, or therapeutic procedure emphasize autonomy and clinical context. Critics argue that such language can create emotional distance from the reality of ending developing human life, while others believe alternative phrasing imposes moral judgment too

quickly and overlooks complex personal circumstances.

Psychologically, both positions reveal the same truth. Language shapes the lens through which moral meaning is experienced. One vocabulary highlights compassion and choice. Another highlights loss and gravity. Neither is emotionally neutral.

Antidepressants and the Language of Healing

My own profession is not immune to linguistic drift. Medications commonly called antidepressants have helped many individuals navigate profound suffering. Compassionate terminology can reduce stigma and encourage people to seek care.

At the same time, some clinicians and patients observe that these medications often function less as direct cures and more as modulators of emotional intensity, sometimes experienced as relief, sometimes as blunting or numbing. Naming them solely as antidepressants can shape expectations before the first dose is taken.

Clear language does not reject treatment. It deepens informed consent. Emotional numbing, sexual side effects, withdrawal challenges, and other sequelae are part of the lived experience for some individuals. Speaking about these realities calmly and honestly allows patients to engage their care with greater awareness.

NeuroFaith[®], Language, and the Nervous System of Culture

From a NeuroFaith[®] perspective, linguistic drift is not merely intellectual. It is physiological. Words regulate the nervous system.

What once would have triggered sympathetic alarm or dorsal vagal shutdown can, through repeated reframing, begin to feel safe. The nervous system mirrors social cues. When language frames an action as compassionate or inevitable, the body may settle into what feels like a ventral vagal state of calm acceptance. Sometimes that calm is grounded safety. Sometimes it is a socially conditioned sense of ease that emerges from conformity rather than discernment.

NeuroFaith[®] calls for a different posture. Neither chronic outrage nor numb resignation, but a grounded ventral vagal clarity that holds compassion and truth together.

The Classroom Whisper

Most of us remember the childhood game where a sentence is whispered around a classroom. By the end, the message had changed completely. Cultural language drift often feels similar, incremental, reasonable, compassionate, until the final narrative bears little resemblance to the original.

Words and the Moral Imagination

Words matter because they shape the imagination through which we interpret life. When language becomes sanitized, risk can appear smaller and moral boundaries more flexible. When language becomes sharpened, compassion can diminish and polarization increase.

A Closing Plea: Returning to the Best Parts of Ourselves

If there is a single invitation beneath these reflections, it is not that one group must correct another, but that all of us slow down together.

Language shapes every one of us. It shapes our nervous systems, our moral instincts, and even our sense of belonging. None of us are immune to its drift. We absorb phrases from the air around us, repeat them without noticing, and gradually find that our emotional compass has shifted. What once startled us begins to feel ordinary. What once felt essential can quietly fade into the background.

Sometimes we wake up and realize we have arrived somewhere we never consciously intended to be. Not through malice, but through small accommodations repeated over time. The words changed first, and the heart followed.

Perhaps the deeper challenge is not to polarize those who see the world differently or to assume evil motives where there may instead be different stories, different wounds, and different paths of formation. Before judging where someone has arrived, we might ask how they got there, and how we ourselves were shaped along our own path, even if those paths led in very different directions.

The task before us is not to harden our language but to soften ourselves. To listen more carefully. To speak more thoughtfully. To recognize that we are all prone to bias, not only in what we believe, but in the words we choose to describe what we believe.

NeuroFaith® reminds me that genuine safety does not come from conformity or from winning arguments. It grows from a grounded ventral vagal presence, a place where conviction and curiosity coexist, where accountability is held with compassion, and where truth can be spoken without losing tenderness.

My hope is simple. That we do not lose the essence of the best parts of ourselves. Our capacity for honest dialogue, for humility, for courage, and for grace. Words matter because they shape who we become. And perhaps the deepest work is not merely choosing better words but becoming people who can hold language lightly enough to keep learning while holding one another firmly enough to remain human.