

A Rose by Any Other Name: An Unexpected Lesson from Abu Ghraib by Juley Fulcher

In 1974, psychology professor Elizabeth Loftus showed research subjects a videotape of a car accident and later asked them to estimate the speed of the cars. Subjects gave significantly faster estimates when they were asked how fast the cars were going when they “smashed” into each other than did subjects who were asked how fast the cars were going when they “hit” each other. This research demonstrated a principle that professionals who rely on persuasive communication have long known: Perception can be influenced by the terminology used to describe the event, even when people witness it with their own eyes.

For lawyers and politicians alike, semantic nuance is a crucial tool of the trade. Good litigators choose their words carefully in order to achieve subtle changes in a judge’s or jury’s perception that could push the balance of the evidence over or under the burden-of-proof requirement. In a recent example, the judge in the rape trial of basketball star Kobe Bryant ruled that the prosecution could not refer to the complaining witness as the “victim” during the trial, citing the potential subtle influence that could arise from terminology that presupposes a crime was committed.

Politicians also choose their words carefully in order to shape the public view of issues and events. In the wake of the recent photographs of violence, threats, coercion, and humiliation by American military personnel of Iraqi detainees in Abu Ghraib prison, a choice was made by Bush administration officials to use the term “abuse” instead of “torture” when addressing the media and the public about the photos. The terminology choice became a story in itself, with media commentators, political pundits, and even late-night comedians taking note. Of course, the discussion centered on the administration’s efforts to diminish public perception of the severity of the prison guards’ actions. But what was particularly troubling was the term chosen to lessen the impact of the photos.

The word “abuse,” when used in the context of violence, threats, coercion, and humiliation, is a term most often associated with crimes against women and children—child abuse, sexual abuse, spousal abuse, child sexual abuse. In fact, in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, the term “child abuse” is used in statutes to refer to violence against children. Similarly, the term “sex abuse” or “sexual abuse” is used in all 51 jurisdictions to describe crimes of rape and sexual coercion. In 29 states and the District of Columbia, the term “spouse abuse” or “spousal abuse” appears in the civil or criminal codes when addressing domestic violence, a crime in which the vast majority of victims are women.

What does this mean for use of the term “abuse” to describe the atrocities of Abu Ghraib?

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