



WITHIN YOUR GATES

בשעריך פי אָבֻדִּים

The Role of Language in Conflict and Reconciliation: A Historical Context

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The events of October 7 and the subsequent war in Gaza have positioned the concept of genocide at the center of public consciousness. This shift has brought the term and its derivatives, along with their profound moral weight, to the forefront of discourse surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and relations. Local and international commentary – across popular, social, and non-traditional media channels – leverages terminology historically associated with the perpetrators of major twentieth-century cases of mass violence and genocide. Some equate Israeli policies to “extermination plans,” “ghettos,” and “concentration camps,” and define the acts of Israeli troops as “mass violence” and “mass atrocities.” Others describe the actions of Hamas militants using terms like “pogroms” or “killing fields,” and utilize genocide-related jargon to describe the actions of terror organizations and antisemitic acts in the Middle East and beyond. Recent developments in the war with Iran have further exacerbated the politicization of the term genocide and the misuse of legal definitions associated with mass atrocities (including war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing). On all sides of the conflict, both the liberal and conservative factions frequently invoke these concepts to advance their political agendas. No doubt, those who use this vocabulary often do so out of sincere ethical urgency, seeking to highlight violations by those they perceive as “the other” or the enemy, or as a response to measures taken by their own governments. They intend to halt and punish actions and policies to ensure the protection of their own nation or group, as well as the preservation of an international system governed by a valid moral code. Yet when thinking of language that opens and closes hearts, one has to wonder about the utility of this lexicon in promoting one-sided agendas, as opposed to mutual efforts towards reconciliation and sustainable peace. How does language entrench irreconcilable positions and polarize narratives? And how might words ease hostilities and promote resolution? To answer these questions, this essay explores the roles of language in making things better or worse in the

context of conflict and violence. Reviewing historical examples of both gross human rights violations and efforts of peacebuilding and deradicalization, it integrates historical studies with findings of social psychology to assess the utility and futility of language.

Investigating conflicts, psychologists find that language plays a powerful role in alleviating or intensifying intergroup tensions. Social Identity Theory, a central paradigm in social psychology, asserts that belonging to groups is an important component in people's identity. Not only do our national, ethnic, religious, or political affiliations matter, but also our gender and our various professional and social circles. In some cases, the mere presence of other groups elicits comparisons, while in others, real or imagined threats to the group's physical or cultural integrity, also referred to as 'group insecurities,' are key to understanding social tensions.¹ The paths to intergroup aggression reveal that individuals who identify strongly with their group and its insecurities tend to favor members of their own group and support the derogation, deprivation, and even physical harm of those viewed as outsiders.²

Language is one of the central factors that define groups, delineates boundaries between distinct collectives, and heightens internal and external insecurities. Historically, language has been a powerful tool in building nations and including or excluding people in ethnic and national communities. Language can shape how members perceive their group, its salience, and significance in their lives. Terminology guides how people describe and what they think about parallel groups or individuals designated as outsiders, while narratives impact how people see the power balance between groups, at times irrespective of the objective reality. Language, therefore, is still a potent instrument for improving or aggravating intergroup relations.

The trajectories of major twentieth-century conflicts provide a wealth of instances of both cases. A well-known example in which language was harnessed to exacerbate conflict is that of the Nazi concept of the "people's community," the *Volksgemeinschaft*. One of the main building blocks of that community was the German language, since a precondition for belonging was being born to a German-speaking community. Language was thus divided between those who were included and excluded from the German nation. Genetic and racial jargon became prevalent, flooding public discourse with terminology related to the *Volk*, hygiene, bloodlines, and hereditary

¹ Henri Tajfel and John Turner, 2004. "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior," in *Political Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, eds. John T. Jost and Jim Sidanius (New York: Psychology Press), 276–293.

² Naomi Ellemers, 1993. "The Influence of Socio-Cultural Variables on Identity Management Strategies," *European Review of Social Psychology* 4, no.1: 27-57. See also in Rupert Brown, 2000. "Social Identity Theory: Past Achievements, Current Problems, and Future Challenges," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 30: 745–778; Lusian Grigoryan et al., 2022. "Multiple Categorization and Intergroup Bias: Examining the Generalizability of Three Theories of Intergroup Relations," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 122, no. 1: 34–52.

diseases, framing the protection of that community as a demand to destroy its designated “enemies.” Consequently, Nazi propaganda formulated self-serving narratives and drafted prerogative laws that set the stage for the protection of legitimate, “healthy” members while stripping outsiders of their civil rights and paving the way for their annihilation.³

Language also functions as a means for certain regimes to assert inter-ethnic and group relations and enforce social hierarchies. For example, under the Soviet Union, many languages were marginalized and deprived of their official or national status. To assert their hegemony, the Soviet authorities introduced Russian as the official language and forced locals to use it exclusively in schools and academia, confining local tongues to private and domestic life. The collapse of the Soviet empire in the 1990s drove parallel processes related to language, whose nature, in their respective regions, unveiled the power balance and hierarchy between Russians and locals. For instance, the receding Soviet influence in the Baltics drove the restoration of Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian as primary and official languages in these countries, asserting these nations’ independence and release from the Russian yoke. Still, many ethnic Russians chose to stay in the Baltics and adhere to the new language norms, a token of their perception of these languages and nations as equal to Russians. In contrast, most Russians living in Kazakhstan chose to leave it following the end of the Soviet regime, citing, among other reasons, the perceived inferiority of the Kazakh language, a Turkish dialect, compared to Russian. The Belarusian context represents a third scenario in which both the Russian and Belarusian languages serve jointly as the country’s official languages. The Soviet regime in Belarus ended more than three decades ago, and present-day Belarus is officially an independent country free of Russian control. Still, the equal status of these languages signifies the lingering Russian cultural, economic, and political influences in Belarus and Russia’s involvement in its inner affairs.⁴

In cases of violent conflicts, terminology and jargon taken from other historical conflicts were, and could be used to elevate group insecurities and intergroup hostilities. The overuse and abuse of concepts taken from other conflicts and their application to current situations certainly contribute to radicalization. Many instances have included descriptions of opponents as Nazis or barbarians to emphasize the senselessness and savagery of violence and take it out of context. In the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the use of the terms Amalek, wiping out, extermination,

³ For a comprehensive summary of the concept of the *Volksgemeinschaft* see Martina Steber and Bernhard Grotto, 2007. “*Volksgemeinschaft*: Writing the Social History of the Nazi Regime,” in eds. Martina Steber and Bernhard Grotto, *Visions of Community*, 2; Michael Wildt, *Volksgemeinschaft als Selbstermächtigung, Gewalt gegen Juden in der deutschen Provinz 1919 bis 1939* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition).

⁴ Mike Medeiros, 2017. “The Language of Conflict: The Relationship between Linguistic Vitality and Conflict Intensity,” *Ethnicities* 17, no. 5: 627–645; Tristan James Mabry, 2011. “Language and Conflict,” *International Political Science Review* 32, no. 2: 189–207.

genocide, apartheid, and settler colonialism increases anxieties on both sides, entrenches attitudes and opinions, and drives both groups away from a willingness to reconcile. Language can also drive delegitimization and dehumanization. Denying outgroup members their humanness happens when one describes them as less than human or equates them to animals; some past examples are vermin, cockroaches, donkeys, dogs, and pigs. Another way to imply that people are less than human is by arguing that they are incapable of complex cognitive processing or experiencing complex emotions. This happens when groups are depicted as lacking agency, brainwashed, scared of their leaders, or submissive. Dehumanization strips outgroup members of their likeness and lessens our empathy, making them legitimate targets of aggression.⁵ Dehumanization also increases violence when perpetrators describe themselves as lions, tigers, or eagles, granting themselves permission to “hunt” or attack enemies like wild animals would. An example was ISIS members who called themselves lions when beheading victims in front of a camera.⁶

The power of language in shaping intergroup and international relations is decisive. However, language is also used by criminal regimes to create and broaden internal divisions. The stigmatizing of specific groups as malevolent or inferior promotes political agendas, consolidates power, and ultimately legitimizes genocidal policies. For example, in 1975, a long civil war in Cambodia ended when a group of communist hardliners, called the Khmer Rouge, took control of the country. They immediately started a communist revolution, which included closing off the population to any foreign contact and subjecting their own citizens to large-scale displacement, forced labor, and mass murder. To incite Cambodians to turn against each other, the regime mixed communist vocabulary with terminology like mindfulness and consciousness, taken from Buddhism; thus, the regime mixed communist vocabulary with terminology like mindfulness and consciousness, taken from Buddhism, which was the main religion in Cambodia. Alongside concepts like “enemy of the state” and “class struggle,” the Khmer Rouge legitimized violence against kin by framing it as expressions of one’s “revolutionary consciousness.” This meant one’s dedication and constant thinking of and contribution to the revolution, demanding blind obedience even in the case of turning against one’s own family members. They also borrowed the terms of “losing face” or “gaining face,” originally used in Cambodian tradition to describe the degradation or maintenance of one’s status in society. Participating in genocidal enterprises and harming

⁵ Jacques Leyens et al., 2001. “Psychological Essentialism and the Differential Attribution of Uniquely Human Emotions to Ingroups and Outgroups,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 31: 395–411; Nickolas Haslam et al., 2005. “More Human Than you: Attributing Humanness to Self and Others,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 89: 937–950.

⁶ Simon Molis Friis, 2015. “‘Beyond Anything We Have Ever Seen’: Beheading Videos and the Visibility of Violence in the War against ISIS,” *International Affairs*, 91: 725–746.

others was praised and rewarded by gaining face, meaning, and earning a higher status among the party cadres. Refusal or any sign of hesitation, on the other hand, could be grounds for losing face, a status that could result in incarceration and death. When the new government overthrew the Khmer Rouge, it restored the original meanings of Buddhist concepts and emphasized the religion's reconciliatory ideas – to promote the reconciliation and rehabilitation of both victims and perpetrators in the country.⁷

Language plays an important role in instigating and escalating violent conflict. Yet it also has positive effects amidst efforts to alleviate conflicts and improve group relations in the aftermath. One effect is through ethnic and national narratives. Collective stories and myths are distributed from leaders to followers and passed down through generations. Narratives help individuals locate themselves within their group and situate their group in relation to its parallels. Here too, terminology and phrasing shape people's perceptions of their history and present. In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, using idioms like "total victory" and concepts like "Tsumud", each group defines its status in relation to the other. This dynamic not only perpetuates the objective and perceived power balance and imbalances between the parties involved. It also compels members to extrapolate the measures necessary to restore a sense of "justice" and "rightful" relations, a process that leads to the escalation of violence and continuation of hostilities.⁸ Changing a group's narrative is no easy task, yet experience shows that it is possible. Success involves critically interacting with the existing narrative rather than denying or ignoring it. For example, in the aftermath of the Second World War, the prevailing German narrative did not directly confront the victors' position that National Socialism was a criminal regime that had been justifiably dismantled. Instead, it centered around the recognition of German suffering during the war and under Allied occupation. When West Germany was founded, the German leader Konrad Adenauer did not deny German suffering but presented it as a token of resilience and courage, making a direct connection between that suffering and the nation's "wrong choices." He added that German authoritarianism and Prussian militarism prepared the ground for Nazism and should thus be neglected. To avoid further suffering and restore their pride, Germans should turn to Christian values and embrace liberal democratic values and ways of life.⁹

⁷ Alexander Laban Hinton, 2005. *Why Did They Kill? Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press), 182–210, 252–275.

⁸ Yohanan Soref, 2010. "Barriers in Resolving the Conflict with Israel – The Palestinian Perspective," in Yaakov Bar Siman Tov, ed., *Barriers to Peace in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute for Israel Research, 76–110.

⁹ Jeffrey Herf, 1997. *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 201–218.

However, the changing of narratives on the micro-level, among those who have suffered atrocities firsthand, requires more attention. Past efforts to foster positive opinions through direct contact between members of rival groups were not always fruitful. They tend to facilitate honest, yet hostile communication that usually does not encourage the parties to establish long-term, reconciliatory connections. Yet initiatives that bring dominant conflict-related narratives into interaction with personal stories can change things for the better. One such endeavor related to the collective post-conflict narrative of Bosnian women, which sees them as helpless victims of war crimes and sexual violence. However, when given the opportunity to narrate their experiences in their own words, Bosnian women told a story of agency and resilience.¹⁰

Another effective strategy for constructing reconciliatory narratives involves referring to intergroup relations using peace-oriented religious discourse and its associated terminology. For example, the country of Bangladesh was founded following a bloody war between East and West Pakistan. During the conflict, tens of thousands of Bengalis, some estimate 3 million, suffered atrocities and mass murder at the hands of the Pakistan army. According to some, Bengali collective trauma caused by that war has not yet fully healed. To promote a reconciliatory narrative, Bengali scholars and leaders recommended integrating Muslim religious words that speak of peace and forgiveness into the national narrative. They hold that words such as *Insaniyat* (humanity or humanness), *Tauba* (repentance), and *Rahm* (compassion and forgiveness) have the power to reshape collective memory and promote reconciliatory attitudes within Bengali society.¹¹

This collection of examples reveals the powerful influence of language on group identity, group relations, conflict, and resolution. While many instances point out the detrimental effects of belligerent lexicon, some prove the power of words to open hearts and bring hostile parties closer together. As the Israeli-Palestinian conflict lingers, we all should learn from historical processes. While avoiding the integration of hostile, derogatory terms to describe “the other,” we should also revisit our own narrative and whether it serves our purposes. Similarly, peace programs and initiatives could also model our own efforts to reshape attitudes, narratives, and actions. When striving to end hostilities between Israelis and Palestinians, we should all think carefully about which words and concepts we use that would open hearts and bring about sustainable peace.

¹⁰ Sara Cobb, 2016. “Engaging Conflict Narratives,” *International Journal of Conflict Engagement and Resolution* 4, no. 2: 127–130.

¹¹ Yasmin Saika, 2011. “Insaniyat for Peace: Survivors’ Narrative for the 1971 War of Bangladesh,” *Journal of Genocide Research*, 14:4, November, 475–501.