

A Note on Ethnophaulisms and Hate Speech

FRANK NUESSEL

University of Louisville, USA

This note provides definitions and discussion of several terms and notions related to a specific type of ethnic naming: (1) the term ‘ethnic’; (2) the neologism ‘ethnophaulism’ created by Abraham Roback in 1944; (3) the notion of ‘hate speech’; and (4) the concept of ‘hate crime’.

The dictionary definition of the word ‘ethnic’ is as follows:

1. Of or pertaining to a social group within a cultural and social system that claims or is accorded a special status on the basis of complex, often variable traits including religions, linguistic, ancestral, or physical characteristics.
2. Broadly, characteristic of a religious, racial, national, or cultural group. (Morris, 1979: 450)

Related to any study of ethnicity and names is the ‘ethnophaulism.’ The etymology of this term derives from a combination of two Greek words *ethnos* (‘people’) and *phaulisma* (‘disparage’) meaning to disparage a group of people. An ethnophaulism is thus a word used to deprecate a group of people, in other words, an ethnic slur. In 1944, Abraham Roback (1890-1965) published his *Dictionary of Ethnic Slurs (Ethnophaulisms)* in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He studied at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. From there, he went to Harvard University to study in its Department of Philosophy and Psychology with William James and others. He is best known for two books *History of American Psychology* (1952) and *Jewish Influence in Modern Thought* (1929). Of specific interest to the readers of *NAMES* is his dictionary of ethnophaulisms, a neologism that he created to refer to ‘foreign disparaging allusions’ (Roback, 1944 [1979]: 13). When an ethnic or national designation is prefixed to a noun, Roback (1944 [1979]: 11) points out ‘... we are immediately aware that we are no longer in the sphere of lexicography, but we have skirted the realm of folklore and social psychology; for here we are studying *attitudes* of one people toward another.’ Roback’s reference work is replete with all sorts of names, phrases, and popular sayings which disparage entire groups. To be sure, ethnophaulisms are not limited to the English language. Other languages, both ancient (Greek, Hebrew, Latin) and modern (French, German, Italian, Modern Greek, Portuguese, Serbo-Croatian, to name but a few) are filled with them. Ethnophaulisms thus provide linguistic evidence of ethnic conflict (Allen, 1983).

Ethnophaulisms are pejorative names or designations for people who belong to an ethnic group and they are usually based on several observable phenomena including skin color, clothing customs, culturally-determined eating and drinking practices, and

other aspects commonly associated with a particular group (Allen, 1983; Bosmajian, 1974). This process of categorization is known as metonymy in which the part stands for the whole (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 35-40; Sebeok 1994: 66). Many of Roback's ethnophaulisms are metonyms, i.e., a particular physical trait or a behavior pattern stand for an entire ethnic group. Such features, seen as a defining characteristic of the entire group, are the basis of stereotyping (Levin and Levin, 1982). While many of these names are ephemeral, they often resurface as viable lexical items when ethnic tensions arise as if they were a latent virus awaiting opportunistic lexical reinfection.

One type of an ethnophaulism is the use of given names commonly associated with a particular ethnic group such as the Irish, the Jews, the Italians, the French, and so forth. Because these given names are so frequent in particular cultures, their use serves to identify a person as a member of a particular ethnic group. Creative writers often employ such names as a way of identifying a person's ethnicity. Another example is the use of a national or ethnic designation before a noun to denote inferiority or a negative quality of the associated noun. Yet another kind utilizes color references that reflect a person's skin color and are used to allude to negative associations associated with members of a specific racial or ethnic group simply on the basis of skin pigmentation.

Ethnophaulisms constitute what has more recently been labeled as 'hate speech.' Walker (1993: 8) points out that there 'is no universally agreed-on definition of hate speech. Traditionally, it included any form of expression deemed offensive to any racial, religious, ethnic, or national group.' Walker (1993: 8) further notes that previous designations for the current term 'hate speech' (1980s onward) included 'race hate' (1920s and 1930s) and 'group libel' (1940s). More recently, a category of criminal act known as a 'hate crime' has emerged. Walker (1993: 9) notes that it '... refers to common-law crimes against persons and property — assault, vandalism, and such — where the perpetrator is motivated by racial or religious hatred for the victim. Thus they involve criminal *acts* as traditionally defined in the law, rather than communication.' The issue of 'hate speech' as the basis of a criminal act, of course raises significant constitutional questions (Walker, 1994: 7-16, and *passim*) related to the first amendment. In her chapter on hate speech, Lakoff (2000) points out that speech is intermediate between thought and action. Nevertheless, hateful words may cause deep psychological damage (Matsuda *et al.*, 1993), thus hate speech might be considered as a type of action. Lakoff (2000: 105-08) argues that performative speech acts are world-changing, hence they constitute actions with consequences (see Haiman 1993 for another interpretation).

Bibliography

- Allen, Irving L., 1983. *The Language of Ethnic Conflict: Social Organization and Lexical Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bosmajian, Haig, 1974. *The Language of Oppression*, Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press.
- Haiman, Franklyn, 1993. *'Speech Acts' and the First Amendment*, Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson, 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, Robin Tolmach, 2000. *The Language War*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Levin, Jack and William C. Levin, 1982. *The Functions of Discrimination and Prejudice*, New York: Harper & Row.
- Levin, Jack and Jack McDevitt, 1993. *Hate Crimes. The Rising Tide of Bigotry and Bloodshed*, New York: Plenum Press.
- Matsuda, Mari, Charles R. Lawrence III, Richard Delgado, and Kimberlé Williams Krenshaw, 1993. *Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultative Speech and the First Amendment*, Boulder: Westview Press.
- Morris, William, ed., 1979. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Roback, Abraham, 1929. *Jewish Influence in Modern American Thought*, Cambridge, MA: Sci-art Publishers.
- Roback, Abraham, 1944. *Dictionary of Ethnic Slurs (Ethnophaulisms)*, Cambridge, MA: Sci-art Publishers [reprinted in 1979 by Maledicta Press, Waukesha, WI].
- Roback, Abraham, 1952. *History of American Psychology*, New York: Library Publishers.
- Sebeok, Thomas, 1994. *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Walker, Samuel, 1994. *Hate Speech. The History of an American Controversy*, Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press.