

h_ words

At some point in the past my father became exasperated at my habit of using words – like Tweedle Dee – to my own purposes. He believed that words have inherent meaning and that I was treating words as if they were malleable to one’s purposes. I replied that I was dealing with new ideas for which there existed no words. The best I could do was find the closest word I could to describe the concept I was struggling with, and expropriate it. He was unsympathetic. I asked him if he expected me to invent new words; he said ‘Yes.’ I went home and found, on trial, that inventing new words is difficult. I hit on a solution: I would insert the letter h as the second letter of an existing word to indicate that I was redefining the word. Thus I envisioned the words ‘ghood’ and ‘bhad’ ‘lhove’ and ‘hhate’. These words would be pronounced with a silent h.

I imagined rules for the invention of these words:

In a conversation, anyone could invent an ‘h_ word’ subject to rules, such as:

1. The definition of the new word must improve, rather than impede, communication. So ‘lhove’ should mean something like ‘love,’ because lhove will carry some of the connotations of love.
2. The definition of an h word is conditional for the purposes of a given conversation. An h_ word describes, “what I mean by the word for present purposes” not “what the word ‘really’ means.”
3. We cannot ask for a perfect definition of an h_ word. The normal words we use are themselves far from perfectly defined. Context allows us to extract precise meaning from those words; h_ words can do no better than that. The definition of an h_ word must be “good enough for the conversation to continue,” given that further clarification may be required.
4. One cannot, having gotten agreement on what an h_ word means, then say that this is what the word ‘really’ means.

A benefit of h_ words is that we can stop arguing about what a given word ‘really’ means. I think a good deal of philosophy would disappear under

this regime, since much philosophy, and political discourse, is about who will get to own the meaning of particular words. h_ words force us to admit that words don't have clear definitions and that looking for definitional perfection often impedes, rather than facilitates, conversation.

My next step was to realize that inserting an h might not be always practical or useful. Do not try defining 'sit' or 'part' that way. I also realized that h stands for Hannes. I.e. these are my personal definitions. I now wrote the words as h_ words, pronounced "h words." Fred is encouraged to produce f_ words.

We now have a flexible system for creating new words. I can define h_talent as, "that part of ability not attributable to one's effort." We now have a *new* word for a specific concept – "that part of ability not attributable to one's effort" – which may be useful in a discussion.

h_racism. An example

Suppose I want a word to describe, "the attitude that some white people have had toward people of color that has allowed white people to treat people of color badly." For many, the word to use is 'racism,' but that definition immediately runs afoul of a different definition of the word that is something like, "drawing odious conclusions about a person based solely on their race, ethnicity, color, etc." I don't mean for these definitions to be perfect ... that is part of the point of what I am writing. As things now stand, if I use 'racism' in either of the senses described here, I will invite a discussion as to what racism "really" is – which is no more or less than a discussion of what the word 'racism' means. Usually this discussion will completely overshadow and derail a discussion of relationships between different groups of people. It amounts to a fight over who gets to own a word. And it impedes communication.

Here's the solution. Suppose my purpose is to talk about the behavior of whites towards others. I will want to use the first definition above – i.e. *by definition* only white people can be racist. To do so, I will invent a new word that I will call h_racism and I will define it as, "the attitude that

some white people have had toward people of color that has allowed white people to treat people of color badly.” I am not telling anyone what the word racism “really” means, let alone what racism ‘really’ is. I am describing what I mean when I say the word in the present conversation. Suppose Robert says, “Well, I’ll define r_racism as – for instance – ‘drawing odious conclusions about a person based solely on their race, ethnicity, color, etc.’”. Good. I now know what you mean when you use the word. Now that we know what the other person means, let’s talk about what matters.

Notice that from this one example it is clear that words do not have unequivocal meanings. If two people cannot agree on the meaning of the word racism, it is pointless to try to determine what the word ‘really’ means. There is great utility in asking what a person means when they use the word and giving that word a new name – such as an h_word.

In conversation, those who know about h_words will stop me and say, “That’s an h_word, right?” The next two sentences are usually, “Yes,” and “Good, then continue.” Communication is improved.