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# Armored Language

**Dale Rosin, D.O.**

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## **Abstract**

*As an example of Wilhelm Reich's concept of armor, the author expounds upon the presence of "armored language," a term signifying commonly used verbal defenses that have the potential to stop, distort or misdirect contact and communication between individuals. This type of language has pervaded all aspects of society creating an obstacle for expressing and comprehending underlying emotional content, thus preventing real communication. Utilizing clinical experiences to illustrate the numerous impediments caused by its rampant use, the author focuses on four distinct aspects of armored language: those terms that obscure the meaning at hand, such as "issue," "dialogue," and "about;" those terms associated as "simile speech" and the related use of "modern onomatopoeia speech" such as "like," "blah, blah, blah," and "whoohah;" the role of armored language in the initiation of social interaction between individuals based on mutual attraction; and, finally, politically correct speech. Numerous examples provide ample evidence that the use of armored language has had a malignant effect on contact and communication between individuals within therapeutic, personal and social interactions. This emotionally void language masks individuals' true feelings, causes ambiguity and confusion that facilitates superficial and unproductive communication, inhibits effective problem solving, and may cause or exacerbate armoring of all parties. By identifying armored language, one can facilitate meaningful contact and communication within therapeutic and social contexts.*

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Essential to a satisfying, fulfilling life is being able to make and sustain emotional contact, a bioenergetic connection, with oneself, with others and the world. The medical orgone therapist is attuned to how patients inhibit or stop the flow of emotional contact, or even make contact

impossible altogether. Helping the individuals become aware that they defend themselves and how they do so is thus central to medical orgone therapy and character analysis. Defenses take different forms. Rigid, chronic characteristic attitudes (aggressivity, passivity, intellectuality, mistrust, and so on) are one. Chronic tension in the musculature is another. A facial expression may also be defensive, as can posture (slumped, overly upright, excessively casual), quality of speech (rapid, too slow, exacting, seductive, dramatic), attire (sloppy, bizarre, incredibly neatly dressed). Wilhelm Reich referred to these defenses, both characterological and muscular, as armor. Armor destructively inhibits and distorts emotional contact and communication.

Today, certain words and phrases and how they are commonly used effectively block contact. They obscure, hide and prevent stronger underlying emotions from being felt, much less expressed. In their emotionally defensive function they can be described as “armored language.”

When one person uses armored language it easily confuses others, and dulls the interaction. Not only does armored language obscure the emotional substance underneath and thereby prevent real communication, the person on the receiving end usually responds reflexively in a detached manner, since he or she is often, consciously or not, unsure of the emotional reality in what is being said. When used with the young, armored language and its attendant confusion and uncertainty can lead to armoring.

### **The Pervasiveness of Armored Language**

Armored language can be found in various areas of society: among people in the business/corporate world, adolescents and young people, adults and how they talk to children, and in general usage.

For example, some patients in treatment who work at Fortune 500 companies communicate in “corporate speak.” Often, I can’t understand what they are telling me except, perhaps, at a very superficial level. Then I learn of their difficulties communicating with their spouse and their children, and I see how the same superficial

language that is the norm in the work place starts to leak into and pollute their personal communications. Over time, such armored language becomes chronic for the person and, by extension, for the corporation or business where they work, their marriage and friendships. People are no longer aware that it is present and it begins to constrict their life as any form of armor does.

An example of armored language common to all groups is the word “issue.” Here is how it is often used: “I have an issue with you...” “It’s an issue...” “She has issues...” When anyone says, “I have an issue with you,” what are they actually saying? Is it big? Is it small? Are you angry with me? Have I hurt your feelings?

“It’s an issue” is much different than saying “It’s a problem” or “It’s a real problem” or “We really have trouble here!” Is it a conflict? One might assume it means one of these but then it’s necessary to find out or figure out “where the other person is coming from.” “She has issues.” Do they mean “She has problems;” “She is in trouble;” “She is mentally ill.” And if it means the latter, is it serious or is the person just joking about another person’s neurotic foibles?

I have observed that when I ask a patient not to use the word “issue” he or she may at first appear uncomfortable, as if they’ve just been thrust into bright sunlight. Then they feel awkward as they realize how distant what they are saying is from what they feel. It can be quite challenging to find words that more exactly express their actual emotions.

### **Parents and Children**

It’s essential in treating children that when parents talk about their child we get to the emotions that are there. When they tell me, “Susie has an issue with...”, it sounds once removed, as if the child is being held at arm’s-length. This apparent attempt at objectivity always hides the real emotions underneath. Thus, in a clinical setting it is important to observe the language that is used by the child/patient and the parents.

Often one hears a parent, or even a teacher, say to a child, “Stevie, you *need* to pick up your shoes.” Or, “You *need* to go and play with the other children.” Imagine the child thinking, “I *need* to? Why do I *need* to? I won’t be happier picking up my shoes. No, I don’t *need* to. Maybe they *want* me to? Then why didn’t they say that? Maybe they don’t want me to pick up my shoes but they feel I need to?” In effect, speaking to a child in such a way leaves it up to the child to decide if he has the authority to make the decision himself. No small point, this lack of clarity, especially when it is chronic, is confusing. As confusion is perpetuated, manifestations of ocular armoring often appear. The child’s eyes begin to look unfocused, glazed over. The next time he may or may not pick up his shoes of his own volition. Confused and “off,” he won’t do it and then, finally, the parent or teacher will yell, “*Put your shoes away right now!*” Startled, even hurt, he may wonder what he did wrong. He may even say to himself, “Why didn’t you say so in the first place?”

This stands in stark contrast to the adult saying, “Stevie, pick up your shoes.” There’s nothing confusing about that statement: I’m the adult, I’m telling you what to do and you’re to do it. When I suggest to parents that they tell their children what they want from them in a direct way, what do they say? “Oh, but that sounds so authoritarian! He might get angry.” This is just one example of the confusion generated when people are fearful of asserting rational, natural authority—a destructive consequence of the shift of our culture from authoritarian to anti-authoritarian.

### Other Examples

Then there’s the word “dialogue.” A wonderful noun, it is now a verb. “Let’s *dialogue* about it.” And I have to ask the person, “Do you want to talk about it?” Should we have a discussion, a talk, a conversation? This, of course, sounds so much more personal, reflecting an actual connection between two people.

And after we’ve dialogued about it, we can “share” some thoughts. Which will certainly “facilitate” our common goal. For example, “Let’s

dialogue so we can share with each other and facilitate a better understanding of our downsizing.” Translation: “We’ll talk so you can understand why we’re firing you.” Or, “We’ll talk so you’ll know you’re being fired but you’ll be so confused you won’t know we’re responsible for doing it!”

I spoke with a woman, a registered nurse, whose husband had been diagnosed with prostate cancer. He followed a holistic treatment regimen for a year and his prostate specific antigen (PSA), a blood marker for the disease, hadn’t gone down. As a trained RN, she knew the risk of his not having surgery for his condition. She had become quite anxious during this year with unexplained anxiety attacks, and feeling disconnected. I asked her if she had told her husband of her concerns. She replied, “I don’t want to interfere with the facilitation of his process.” I told her I really didn’t know what she had said and she repeated it. I said, “You don’t want to interfere with the facilitation of his process?” As I repeated it, she looked at me, tears welling up in her eyes. Finally she said, “I want him to have the surgery... soon.” After hearing herself say this, and seeing what she was or rather what she wasn’t saying to him, she was able to speak her true feelings. She told me how angry she’d become at his attempts at self-cure when she knew that waiting much longer could kill him. Making contact with her frustration and anger relieved her anxiety and she went home and told him how she felt. Shortly thereafter he had the surgery. And he’s alive today.

Another phrase popular today that obscures the matter at hand (the “issue,” so to speak) is “It’s not about... It’s about...” “About” goes around the matter, even sidesteps it, in its vagueness. I don’t want to know what it’s not about, or even what it is about. Tell me specifically what you are saying! Come to the point, please.

Imagine an accident victim being wheeled into the major trauma room of the emergency ward. One physician begins to examine the patient. As another doctor approaches, a nurse calls out, “His blood pressure is dropping rapidly!” The new doctor asks, “Why is this patient’s belly distended? What’s his status?” The first doctor responds,

“Well, it’s not about his broken arm or his concussion.” The new doctor asks, “Yeah, so what’s his status?” The first doctor responds, “It’s not about his diabetes. It’s about an issue with blood in his abdomen.” “What?” says the second doctor?

When people pepper their speech with this phrase it always keeps communication vague, unfocused and superficial. It prevents concise identification of what is being presented and any problem or difficulty is immediately obfuscated. Thus, real problem solving cannot occur. If there is no real problem solving, how can one begin to take responsibility for a problem or one’s actions? A society without responsibility cannot tolerate any natural authority. We are again referencing our present anti-authoritarian culture.

Then, there is what some call “simile speech.” Once the province of “Valley Girls,” this has now become a common way of talking. “I was, like, ‘What do you mean? How could you *do* that?’” Or, “I was, like, really angry.” Were you really angry? Were you angry as if you were angry?

A young woman in treatment was talking about breaking up with her boyfriend. She was trying to make sense of all her feelings. As she talked, she said, “I was, like, so hurt. I thought about all the, like, time, we’d spent together. And, like, I’ve known him since I was, like, 17.” She went on in this way and, although I could feel the intensity behind her words, she was becoming stuck in her narrative. It was clear that she needed to truly feel her emotions in order to be clear about what to do. I gently asked her to try not to use the word “like.” She continued talking, catching herself each time “like” snuck in. Within minutes she said that she could feel her heartbreak and began to sob. This not only gave her relief, but she was then able to see her relationship with her boyfriend more clearly, which led her to stay with her decision to break up with him.

Simile speech is always an emotional “speed bump.” The person starts to talk, some emotion begins to build and then “like” stops everything. After the “like” diminishes intensity, emotion builds up again until the next interruption.

Simile speech ties in with two other forms. The first, “blah, blah, blah,” appears to have risen to respectability. One often hears, “And he was like, ‘blah, blah, blah;’ and I was like...” Although seemingly casual, this word usage is dismissive of what is being talked about. It actually shows disdain, even contempt, for the feelings, persons and events that are being described. It says, in effect, “What happened or what was said was so wanting, so beneath me, that I’m not going to give it words.” As a general social behavior, what may appear to some as benign contributes to a loss of civility in discourse, evidencing actual social deterioration.

The other usage that simile speech goes with I refer to as “modern onomatopoeia speech.” Onomatopoeia is defined as “the formation or use of words such as buzz or murmur that imitate the sounds associated with the objects or actions they refer to.” In the old Batman TV show, “BANG” and “POW” were spelled out. Today’s examples include “I was like *eeee-yah-ooo*” or “She said that and I was, like, *whooh!*” The ER surgeon asked his colleague, “How bad is the internal bleeding?” His colleague replied, “It’s like *yeeow whooh!*”

Language has always been used to initiate social interaction, including those that are romantic and loving based on attraction between two people. Today one hears, especially amongst the young, “Want to hang out?” (This always brings to mind two shirts drying on an old-fashioned clothesline, flapping in the breeze. Occasionally the sleeves touch, making minimal contact.) How different if one says, “Let’s get together” or “Let’s spend some time together,” or the even more emotional, “I’d like to spend some time with you.” All express a desire for closeness, implying warmth, and possibly even more. Except today one hears, “Let’s get together... and CHILLLL.”

Another term used by young people but now also by others is “hooking up.” This can mean many things, such as kissing or having sex, usually without emotional feeling or attachment. Although this term comes closer to really saying what it describes, it is used in a way that connotes a perfectly normal occurrence. “Hooking up,” however, sounds mechanical, devoid of emotion, like the coupling of train cars.



I doubt that people hear this in the term, which has gained a certain respectability because of its frequent and common use. It is also more broadly applied to a variety of behaviors and hence the more confusing to a young woman when a young man says, “You wanna hook up?”

Today, the offer to “hook up” is often preceded by “hanging out.” A young man I was treating complained that he was getting nowhere with the young woman he was enamored of. He told me what he wanted to tell her: “I’d really like to spend some time with you and get to know you. I think you’re so beautiful. Your eyes are amazing and I love your sense of humor.” The next time he saw her he said, “You wanna hang out some time, just CHILL?” His approach, which masked his true feelings, made his offer sound casual, even impersonal, almost as if he didn’t care one way or the other. It put a definite chill on the situation and the young woman refused his invitation.

Currently, people say, “Oh, I’m so bipolar today,” instead of describing their moodiness or sadness or overt happiness. Consider the everyday use of the term “sex addict,” as with the golfer Tiger Woods and public revelations about his extramarital sex life. What does this really mean? In another time, he might have been called an “adulterer,” a “philanderer” or a “cheater.” If he were single, he might have been called a “Don Juan” or a “two-timer”—all words with power and feeling. In the past, if someone was hit and killed by a train, the news said, “A 30-year-old man was killed by a train today.” Now one hears, “A 30-year-old man on the train tracks resulted in a ‘trespasser strike’.” A “trespasser strike?” What’s that?

### **Political Correctness**

Finally, a word about political correctness or politically correct speech. Seemingly well intentioned, it is censored speech, an imposed, rigid morality that seeks to eliminate any words or phrases deemed offensive or possibly offensive to an identified group, usually seen as victimized by society-at-large. In actuality, in terms of its result, it renders people self-conscious, destroys spontaneity, neuters language and strips it of any visceral liveliness or emotion.

Consider, for example, that “academic dishonesty” has replaced “cheating;” “single-parent household” has replaced “broken home;” “non-autonomous entity” has replaced “fetus;” and “undocumented alien” has replaced “illegal immigrant.” The evolution of politically correct terms is reflected in the Annual Christmas Concert... the Annual Holiday Concert... the Annual Winter Concert... the Annual End of the Year Concert... the Annual Concert. Another example are the words of the song “Old Man River.” The original introduction was “Nigger folks work on the Mississippi; nigger folks work while de white folks play... .” This evolved into “Colored folks work on the Mississippi... “ and still later, “All us folks work on the Mississippi; all us folks work while the white folks play... .”

A striking example of the “people first” rule in politically correct speech comes from the NAACP. This civil rights organization, founded in 1909, is always referred to by its acronym as a result of political correctness. Its name, in fact, is the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Imagine the horrified reaction if one were to use the phrase “colored people” in a classroom or at a cocktail party. Yet the “people first” version, “people of color,” is used commonly and considered socially acceptable.

## **Conclusion**

I have described and highlighted some common words and phrases and their usage that, from my observation, are an impediment in people’s lives, and in their therapy. They disguise, obscure, sanitize and otherwise hide what the person is really feeling. This reflects a defensive superficiality that robs life of its richness, excitement and depth.