Un-Labeling and Unlocking our Shared Humanity: An Expert Interview with Dr. Anna Szilágyi

Dr. Anna Szilágyi is an expert in communication, media, and politics who explores the linguistic dynamics of public speech and private interactions. She has taught classes at the Savannah College of Art and Design in Hong Kong, Central European University in Budapest, and Saint Louis University in Madrid. Her writings have appeared in academic journals and books, including The Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict and Advances in the History of Rhetoric. She has also written articles and provided commentaries for media outlets in different parts of the world, including Global Voices, Público, Quartz, Rappler, and Vice News. Her global educational program, “Words Break Bones” equips journalists, professionals, and citizens with crucial linguistic skills to detect and counter patterns of wounding, divisive, and discriminatory speech.

Hi Anna, it’s so wonderful to be here with you. Being an expert on communication, you have been investigating the destructive power of human speech for many years now. Your focus on the structure of language is rather specific: grammar and rhetorics. Can you tell our readers a bit more about your approach?

Thank you, it’s an honor to speak with you. My background is in linguistics and social sciences and yes, I am one of those researchers who identify tools of language which can hurt, harm, and set groups of people against each other. I’m also keen on sharing the observations and findings in my field with experts, journalists, and the general public, because it breaks my heart to see how much suffering occurs because we aren’t equipped with necessary skills to recognize and resist the linguistic devices that foster human rights abuses and collective tragedies.

Schools teach grammar and rhetoric, but most often in a way that keeps these subjects entirely detached from our life experiences. While oppression, terror, war, massacre, and genocide are always assisted, fed, and harbored by words, schools fail to educate their students about the essence of language that makes human catastrophes possible. We are introduced to the vicious ideologies of the past while studying history but we don’t learn about the rhetorical devices that enabled their spread. This creates a gap in our consciousness, increasing our susceptibility to speech that incites and legitimizes injustice, violence, and abuse.

This suggests that there is a universal mechanism behind rhetoric that leads to violence. But doesn’t this differ across language and context?

Yes, there are variations, but they concern mainly the content and not so much the structure of language. The targets of anger and hatred might be different – for instance, people can be vilified for their skin color, ethnic background, gender, religion, class, sexual orientation, ideological stance, and political sympathies. Yet, there are recurring patterns across time and space in rhetoric that make abuses against those on the receiving end seem justified, even praiseworthy.
And precisely for this reason it is crucial for all of us to better detect these tools of language and understand how they operate, to give individuals and communities across the world resilience against speech that elicits group-targeted harm before it’s too late.

**Let’s talk about some of these patterns and mechanisms in detail. One such mechanism you often discuss is labels. I think many of us recognize that labels are important, but where does their power come from?**

We all use many labels to group ourselves and others as we go through life and this is natural. However, some labels can become so powerful that speakers will mistakenly assume that they define individuals. In reality the opposite is the case: these robust labels hide people’s complexity and reduce them to cardboard figures with a few, often very negative traits. The late social psychologist, Gordon Allport, called these terms “labels of primary potency” and compared them to *shrieking sirens* which blind us. Let me share with you a personal story to illustrate how this works.

I’ve been regularly hosting workshops with my friends for Roma teenagers in Eastern Europe. Roma is the biggest ethnic minority in the region and a longstanding target of discrimination and we try to help young Roma people to deal with the hostility they inevitably face in life because of their background. This is how I met “Joseph,” a soft spoken, bright young man, passionate about natural sciences who comes from one of the poorest villages of Hungary. Joseph studied hard and, to his and his family’s great excitement, eventually got accepted to a high school. But as soon as Joseph began school, one teacher began to make it very clear that he wasn’t welcome: “Go back where you’re coming from,” she told him repeatedly. Becoming completely distressed by the end of school year, Joseph eventually opened up to his parents who — worried and feeling powerless to fight for their boy’s rights — decided to withdraw him.

In his teacher’s eyes, Joseph was just a tag — the woman simply couldn’t see and hear the real Joseph: the complex human being who just happened to be Roma. This is what labels of primary potency do to us.

**But how and why can some labels grow so powerful? For example, in this case what made the teacher so strongly affected by the label Roma?**

These labels or tags gain influence because politicians, influential public personalities, the media, as well as societal perceptions, facilitate their rise and spread.

If a few words and images are used repeatedly to depict a group of people, their meanings attached to the label will be triggered automatically and be all we see. Most likely Joseph’s teacher, for example, would only have heard that Roma people are *uncivilized*, *lazy*, and *criminals* — the limited and demeaning vocabulary has shaped the public image of Roma people in Eastern Europe. Other words — *achievement, care*, or *decency*, for example — never made it in the discussions.
But there is another factor that makes us susceptible to labels: our own need for recognition. We all want to feel worthy and this longing leaves us prone to words, including labels, which gives people the dangerous illusion of being better than others. When we tag people, we often tag “them down” — which means that we claim superiority over them. For example, by labeling Joseph as a “Roma,” his teacher distinguished herself and non-Roma Hungarians as superior to him. This mechanism is common: you can hardly tag someone down without tagging yourself up.

And how do you see all this playing out now when it comes to party politics?

Profoundly. We live in an era when labels foster the decline of people’s trust in each other on a dramatic scale globally. Take the example of the UK. The Brexit campaign in 2016 created a lot of anger, anxiety, and fear, setting those who wanted to leave the EU and those who wanted to remain against each other. And so individuals began to define themselves and others exclusively in terms of their stance on Brexit: a “Brexit,” a “Leave,” a “Remainer,” or simply a “Remain” and nothing more. People even started to use these tags in place of their loved ones’ names which led to the break-ups of couples, families, and friendships.

All this may sound familiar to many of us: politically loaded labels foster division, distrust and resentment on a collective level in a lot of places today, including the United States and my native Hungary, and I am no exception. This comes as little surprise: the hearts and minds of people from all walks of life tend to get hijacked by labels when they see that their peers, colleagues, neighbors, friends, partners, and family members support politicians, parties, and policies that they deem obnoxious, harmful, or even dangerous.

But we also need to remember that these tags don’t come out of thin air. Political personalities and parties capitalized and continue to capitalize on our susceptibility to labels, urging people to reduce themselves and others to a few tags, at the expense of our shared humanity. And the sad truth is that labels often also entrap those working to oppose these actors.

And am I correct in assuming that words like “us” and “them” only reinforce the division and hostility labels create?

Absolutely. Lately, the problem of gendered pronouns has made the subtle power of pronouns more visible. But misgendering is far from being the only instance when pronouns can wound and harm humans, including transgender and non-binary people.

All pronouns – including “I,” “You,” “We,” “Us,” “Our,” “They,” or “Them” – have great power over individuals and groups. Yet most of the time, if people hear a sentence they will pay attention to the nouns, verbs, adjectives and ignore the pronouns in it. But this is misguided, as pronouns mobilize big feelings within people: they can fill our hearts with joy or make us sad, angry, and even hateful. Over Zero has just released a report on LGBT scapegoating. Authoritarian political leaders across
the world use the LGBT or LGBTQ acronym as a powerful label of primary potency to depict non-heterosexuals as “groomers” and “pedophiles”. While doing so, they also exploit the power of pronouns, distinguishing these people as “They” and “Them”, while referring to themselves and the rest of the population as “We” and “Us”. And the power of labeling is further unleashed by the possessive pronoun “our”: we need to protect “Our Kids” from “Them”, they say about LGBTQ people, many of whom are parents themselves.

This is a common scenario. Political figures create a wonderful, virtuous “We” and “Us” and say horrible things about “They” and “Them,” and with the marvel of technology, this rhetoric can be spread night and day. Eventually people will no longer see others as individuals, instead they will believe that everyone who belongs to “We” is good and righteous, and everyone who belongs to “Them” is evil, and act accordingly.

**Besides labels and plural forms, you often stress the importance of metaphors. Can you say more about how metaphors operate?**

We use this rhetorical device almost every time we speak. We aren’t electronic devices, but upon feeling exhausted we may suggest that we need to “recharge ourselves.” When people abruptly disappear from our lives, we can claim that they “ghosted” us.

As linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson demonstrated, these figures of speech settle in the human psyche, and we rely on them to make sense of ourselves and the world. In other words, we think, reason, and feel in terms of metaphors, including the ones we hear, without registering this. This is why companies, political actors, and the media rely on tropes to discreetly influence the thinking and behavior of societies.

But let’s focus for a minute on how this has led to violence. We see, for instance, that inhumane actions can quickly become a norm in a community when powerful public actors start to claim that members of a group are “pests,” “reptiles,” “parasites,” “disease,” “filth,” “demons,” “dreaded beings,” or alike. “They are the living, walking dead. They are of no use to society anymore” — said in 2016 Rodrigo Duterte who was then President of the Philippines. In a country where zombies are emblematic figures of popular culture, the politician used these words to kick-start his so-called “war on drugs” campaign. Between twelve thousand and thirty thousand Filipinos were murdered during this bloody extrajudicial crackdown: not only alleged dealers, but also small-time drug users. Importantly, their crimes have never been proven, seriously investigated, nor even questioned.

People leading the most ordinary lives can also easily find themselves at the crosshairs. The Nazis and their collaborators infamously called Jews “rats,” “parasites,” “vermin,” “lice,” “bacilli,” “contagion,” and “filth.” In Pol Pot’s Cambodia, where nearly two million innocent people were brutally killed, government propaganda represented the victims as “microbes” who must be “swept aside” and “smashed.” In 1994, in Rwanda, in just 100 days, the ethnic Hutu extremists slaughtered at least 800,000 Tutsis and more moderate Hutus. The Hutu propaganda called the Tutsis “cockroaches” and “snakes.”
“Cockroaches” and “snakes” — such metaphors can fill people with a sense of superiority fueled by disgust, so that they can lose sight of the humanity of another at once. Even a neighbor or a friend may appear to be a sickening or horrifying creature to us, and a deserving target of violence.

**One of the most entrenched conflicts of our lifetime is in Israel/Palestine. How are you seeing these language patterns play out in, and even create a permission structure, for this conflict?**

First of all, I need to say that discussions on the wounding power of language focus on prevention for a good reason. Reminding people of the destructive potential of labels, pronouns, and other devices at times when brutal violence is already taking place, with communities seeing each other as irreconcilable enemies, may appear unacceptable and insensitive or too little too late. This is also evident by how difficult it has become even for those who aren’t directly affected to speak about the devastating collective tragedies you mentioned in a way that remains respectful of the fact that they caused and cause horrible suffering to people both in Palestine and in Israel. And the urgency of the situation makes it even harder for us to find words which acknowledge the pain and despair of all those who suffer.

The long and complicated history of Jewish and Palestinian peoples has created a sharp “us versus them” division that is both reflected and emboldened by language. Indeed, words have played a central role throughout this conflict and even facilitated violence: labels and plural pronouns that establish, reinforce, and fuel us-them divisions; metaphors that identify people as animals or characterize situations as demanding violent deeds.

And as trauma deepens, the power of the labels and pronouns separating communities only grows. This has narrowed dramatically the space for words that would allow us to connect with the shared humanity of Jewish, Arab, and Muslim people.

In these dark times, it becomes all the more urgent that we value and embrace the efforts of those working to break us out of the cycles of labeling, we-ing, them-ing, and dehumanizing. One such example is “Standing Together,” a grassroots movement mobilizing Jewish Israelis, Palestinians, and diaspora communities around the world in support of peace.

It’s important to understand that loosening up our attachment to tools of language which divide us doesn’t mean that we should put aside or even suppress our aspirations, or that we shall suddenly accept ideas, beliefs, and agendas which normally we wouldn’t. Giving up on the urge to reduce ourselves and others to labels for instance, can rather help us regain our autonomy to speak from a place that nurtures dialogue and acknowledges our fates are intertwined.

Anna, thank you so much for your time and expertise.