

A PROFILE ON LINGUISTIC TERRORISM

BY LILLIAN K KRAUSE



WHAT IS LINGUISTIC TERRORISM?

Linguistic Terrorism can be defined as a partisan misuse of words, grammatical form, tone, or otherwise to support some form of political agenda (Donnelly).

This definition is vague to encapsulate the various ways that this key term had changed in various ways throughout history and time. From sanctioned law to everyday social interactions, Linguistic Terrorism has the opportunity to be present. In this edition of *The English Review*, author Lillian Krause will explore the historical context of this term, profile the experiences of two principal authors that detail modern Linguistic Terrorism, and discuss how society will view this key term in the future.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF LINGUISTIC TERRORISM

Linguistic Terrorism, or *la terreur linguistique*, was first established as a term in France under the political leadership of Robespierre. In 1794, Bertrand de Barere and Henri Gregoire began their political agenda to isolate and suppress the voices of those who did not speak French, the majority of whom were lower-class or minorities. Under the premise of creating a unified French state, these leaders were promoting a dictator-like rule and eradicating any little diversity the country once held (Irujo).



These actions were carried out through the political promotion of the "Autumn Decrees", which stated that the *langue d'oïl* was adopted as the only language of the state, and therefore no public act could be written or registered other than in the French language in any part of the Republic. We can see here how the first use of Linguistic Terrorism can have detrimental effects on the diversity of society when given the political power to do so (Irujo).

LINGUISTIC
TERRORISM IN
HISTORY AND
MODERN DAY



AMY TAN
and "Mother Tongue"

In the essay titled "Mother Tongue", Amy Tan, a first-generation American and daughter of a Chinese immigrant, discusses the barriers of language and the perception of "perfect English" in different social spheres in America.

"I have described it to people as 'broken' or 'fractured' English. But I wince when I say that. It has always bothered me that I can think of no way to describe it other than 'broken,' as if it were damaged and needed to be fixed" (pg. 2, Tan).

This quote here exemplifies the reality of Linguistic Terrorism used today. Tan explores the struggle that immigrants face when they decide to uproot their lives for new opportunities in America. Despite making the ever-difficult decision to uproot their lives into a completely new environment, immigrants that do not speak English with an American accent, or without the grammar taught in American schools from a very young age, are taken less seriously in medical, corporate, or transactional environments. Tan uses examples of her own perception of her mother's English to convey how present this ideology is in our everyday lives, and she calls for us to recognize these biases and act against them.

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GLORIA E. ANZALDUA
and *"How To Tame a Wild Tongue"*

Gloria E. Anzaldua is a Chicana author and poet, who focused her studies and texts on the intersectionality of culture, race, and queer identities. In *"How To Tame a Wild Tongue"*, originally published in 1987 in her book *Borderlands: La Frontera*, she explores the harm that immigrants meet when faced with the decision to give up their heritage to assimilate to "American" norms.

"So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language."

Here, Anzaldua speaks on how critical it is to remain identified with the heritage that immigrants have descended from, whilst also being content with claiming the new identity of being American.

Anzaldua focuses on this idea of remaining true to one's identity as she applies it to first-generation Americans that are met with the decision to be forced to choose the social norms of white America or to accept the isolation and prejudice that their native language and culture is met with in response.

She poses the question; why not construct your own identity? This idea of intersectionality between two different lives is how Anzaldua believes immigrants should be treated in America, however she believes they are expected to abandon their sense of self, culture, and language to be accepted in America, much like how Tan explains in *"Mother Tongue"*.

"Chicanas who grew up speaking Chicano Spanish have internalized the belief that we speak poor Spanish. It is illegitimate, a bastard language. And because we internalized how our language has been used against us by the dominant culture, we use our language differences against each other."

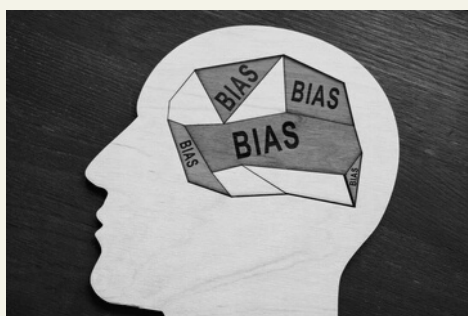
Here, Gloria describes the use of two languages interspersed with one another; a common experience that immigrants from around the globe find comfortable communicating in, as it combines their two identities in form of language. This negative view that Anzaldua describes is another example of how we see Linguistic Terrorism in play in modern society, and how rather than viewing this as a beautiful combination of culture, it is looked down upon and seen as not fitting into either identity.

LINGUISTIC TERRORISM THROUGHOUT TIME

Since the introduction of Linguistic Terrorism in 1794 to its acknowledgment in the works of Gloria E. Anzaldua and Amy Tan more recently, the essence of this key term has changed over time. It has gone from its use of blatant discrimination by political power to a normalized negative bias that people have toward non-American languages in today's world. Though this change has become something of a less obvious form of discrimination, it is just as powerful in silencing the voices that make America the "most diverse country" in the world. Though it is not clear in the laws of our constitution, this idea of Linguistic Terrorism permeates into the workplace, school, and even our own homes as written in *"How To Tame a Wild Tongue"* and *"Mother Tongue"*.



From its very beginning, Linguistic Terrorism has had the opportunity to adapt to rhetoric and social spheres throughout a lengthy period of time, so there is no doubt it will pervade into the future. As the audience, you are urged to recognize the continuation of these biases against diversity in language in all aspects of life: political leadership, social media usage, and your everyday conversations. With the advancement of social platforms within the last ten years, there is significant potential for Linguistic Terrorism to carry on with its users, whether it be at the hands of prominent political figures or your own family and friends.



THE AUDIENCE: WHAT YOU CAN DO

Linguistic Terrorism has remained ever-present in the use of rhetoric throughout history, as discussed above. As the audience, it is now more critical than ever to be able to recognize the employment of this strategy when consuming media today, considering the possibility of how unrecognizable these biases can be.

By normalizing the ideology that Linguistic Terrorism teaches in rhetoric, the reader may lean to adopt it as they absorb the text it is present in. These harmful biases disguise themselves as a sense of pride and nationalism for their state, whilst silencing the diversity that makes it so special. It is paramount that as those who engage in this form of rhetoric, we are able to recognize when it is harmful to the communities affected by it.