

Some words hurt. Put them in the dustbin.

Words are like knives. They can be used to help us in many ways, or they can hurt badly.

What would our lives be if we did not have language — no conversations, no storybooks, no poetry, no songs? Being able to communicate with words is a precious part of being human. Words help us to express great ideas, to teach and learn, and to grow loving relationships.

Unfortunately, words can also cause a lot of pain. One example is the use of mean jokes to hurt others. We talked about this in last month's article. Now, we look at other ways in which language is used to **discriminate** against others. When we see more clearly how our language affects people, then we can choose our words with greater wisdom.

Hateful labels

In comic books, you would have noticed curses and other bad words replaced with symbols like “#!@%!” On TV, the words are beeped out. But, in real life, nothing blocks out slurs. When someone curses you during a brief argument, it stings. Imagine how much worse it feels when words are used to hurt a whole ethnic community for years and years.

Racial **slurs** hurt. We seldom discuss the problem openly because the words can be embarrassing. Yet, if we do not talk about them, we will not be able to fix the problem.

As society becomes more polite, some of the older local racial slurs have died out. Sadly, a few are making a comeback. Take for instance the term “apu neneh”, which was a Hokkien slur against Indian men. In the past,



WHAT YOU CAN DO

- When in groups, speak in the language that everyone understands.
- Pick your words thoughtfully. Be kind and respectful. Never use racial slurs.
- When someone uses language that hurts, explain why it is wrong.

the term was so common that some non-Indian parents would say to their kids, “If you are naughty, the apu neneh will catch you!” Making someone of another race seem like a monster is very wrong.

Word choices

The comeback of the apu-neneh term has led to a lively internet debate about whether it is alright to use nowadays. Some say it is harmless. Others say it is still as rude and hurtful as before.

In a 2016 Facebook post, Singaporean poet and playwright Alfian Sa’at advised that it does not matter what our intentions are when we use sharp words. “A slur is a knife — if you’re the one holding the handle, you don’t get to decide how sharp it is — this is the sole and **sovereign** right of the person at its tip,” he said. In other words, the feelings of those who are cut are what really count.

To see words as verbal knives reminds us that, like real knives, our language can be used to do good or to

harm people. As Mr Alfian points out, it is not the speaker who gets to decide whether the words hurt or not. This means we must be sensitive to the effect of our words on other people. Racial slurs are a clear and extreme way to discriminate against minority groups. There are also less obvious ways in which language is used to push away or put down individuals. At school, kids may purposely speak in a mother tongue that someone doesn’t understand so that he or she is excluded. Sometimes kids — even close friends — come up with embarrassing nicknames that catch on and stick for a long time. So, be mindful of your language: use words that are **inclusive**; get rid of slurs and other words that hurt.

— By MARY GEORGE

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Racial slurs are taken seriously

As societies around the world get more educated, they are taking the problem of racial slurs more seriously.

In January this year, when a politician in Italy joked that the country’s first black minister looked like an orang utan, the court ruled that he was guilty of racial abuse. Meanwhile, McDonald’s fired one of its workers for using a racial slur against a customer from a minority race when they got into an argument. And, in Canada, the police are looking

for the racists who spray-painted curses on the campaign posters of a Chinese-Canadian politician. They called her a “chink” which is a racial slur against Chinese.

Although these are “only” words, it is good that racial slurs are taken very seriously nowadays in these places. Behind such words is a painful history of discrimination against racial minorities. Racial slurs can make people feel that they are not worthy of being treated as human.

The sticks and stones myth

There is an ancient saying that states, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me.” Language historians guess that this saying may have been used by parents to make kids feel better when they were teased or mocked. In which case, the intention was good.

However, the problem is that it is not true. Words can harm us. The wounds may not heal quickly. Sometimes, the emotional scars remain for years.

VOCAB BUILDER

discriminate (say “dis-kri-mi-nayt”; verb) = treat some people worse than others because of their race.

inclusive (say “in-kloo-siv”; adjective) = helping everyone feel they belong.

slurs (say “sler”, noun) = very insulting remarks about someone.

sovereign (say “saw-ver-in”; adjective) = with the most power.