

Talking About: Language Desensitization in a Strategic War Think Tank

Anthropologist Carol Cohn (1987) spent a year studying the subculture of a strategic think tank for US government defense analysts who plan nuclear strategy. She wanted to find out how people can plan the business of destruction: in other words, “think about the unthinkable.” Through a process of enculturation, Cohn learned the language necessary to discuss military strategy, which she calls “technostrategic.” As she became fluent in this highly specialized language, she was surprised to find that she had lost the ability to think about the human costs of war.

Abstraction and **euphemisms** focus all discussion on weapons and strategy. She found that the use of several types of metaphors allow the analysts to connect in positive ways to their work. First, the euphemisms invoke hygiene and medical healing. They talk about *clean bombs* (bombs that release power but not radiation) and *surgically clean strikes* (bombing that takes out weapons or command centers only). Second, images of country life are used: missiles are located in *silos* as if on a farm, and piles of nuclear weapons loaded in a submarine are called *Christmas tree farms*.

In addition, Cohn discovered male-gender attribution to the missiles. Beyond the expected phallic imagery, bomb detonations were frequently described sexually, comparing the

explosion to an orgasm. Moreover, missiles are spoken about as if they were infants or little boys. The implication is that they hope the bomb will be aggressive (like a boy) and not timid (like a girl). After the first successful test of the hydrogen bomb in 1952, one pleased atomic scientist wrote to another, “It’s a boy” (701).

Cohn began her fieldwork interested in how nuclear defense analysts discuss massive destruction and human suffering day in and day out as part of their job. She quickly found that they don’t. Military strategy demands a language that focuses on weapons only—not results—in order to achieve rational objectivity.

But the costs of embracing this language privilege a distanced and aggressive (i.e., “masculine”) view over any others. Human costs cannot be discussed; these were “feminine” concerns. To her surprise, Cohn discovered that once she was a speaker of this language, she could no longer express her own values since they were outside of “rational” discourse. Not only could she not articulate her ideas using this language, but she was written off as a “hippie” or “dumb” if she tried. Her work carries an important message: what does any language allow us to think and say?