

1983

# The Language of Oppression

[Table of Contents](#) [Previous](#) [Next](#)

*"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me."*

Haig Bosmajian, UW professor of speech communication, takes issue with that old saying. "While names, words, and language can be, and are, used to inspire us, to motivate us to humane acts, to liberate us, they can also be used to dehumanize human beings and to 'justify' their suppression and even their extermination," he asserts.

Bosmajian's scholarly research on the language of oppression began in the 1960s when he examined the rhetoric of Adolf Hitler and Nazis, especially the language used to demonize and dehumanize the Jews and other "enemies" of the State. "The Nazis persistent portrayal of the Jews as 'vermin,' 'bacilli,' 'parasites,' and 'disease' contributed to the 'Final Solution,'" he notes. His explorations of how language has been used to defend the indefensible led him to examine the language of white racism in a seminal journal article in 1969; the paper subsequently was reprinted in over a dozen anthologies and texts adopted in university courses across the nation.

"With the subjugation and suppression of African Americans came a language which labeled them 'chattels,' 'property,' and 'beasts,'" he notes. This sort of oppressive language appeared in legal documents, political speech, and religious discourse. Similarly, he says, the subjugation and extermination of a significant population of "American Indians" was accompanied by the use of dehumanizing language defining them as "non-persons," "savages," and "Satan's partisans."

From the 1970s through the 1990s, Bosmajian's work has received national recognition. His articles and book chapters have been reprinted in college textbooks and tradebooks, appearing alongside the writings of Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, Aldous Huxley, Susanne Langer, George Orwell, Kurt Vonnegut, and other writers who have examined the uses and abuses of language.

Bosmajian was honored in 1983 with the George Orwell Award from the National Council of Teachers of English for his book, *The Language of Oppression*,<sup>1</sup> which treats the languages of anti-Semitism, White Racism, Indian derision, sexism, and war. The Orwell Award was established in 1975 to recognize each year the author or producer of a print or nonprint work which has made an outstanding contribution to the critical analysis of public discourse. Past recipients include Sissela Bok, Noam Chomsky, Neil Postman, and Erving Goffman.

Bosmajian has extended his explorations to the realm of language, power, and the law. In his book, *Metaphor and Reason in Judicial Opinions*,<sup>2</sup> published in 1992, he argues that while we perceive the courts as relying on the precise, literal use of language, in fact some of the most important judicial decision have relied on figurative language, especially on the metaphor. The "wall of separation between church and

state," "captive audiences," and giving First Amendment freedoms "breathing space" are but a few examples. Bosmajian argues that "when the courts speak through their opinions...they have the authority to define and to impose their tropes [figures of speech], the metaphors and personifications, directly and indirectly. While the tropes can help us comprehend what may have been incomprehensible, can help us find new truths, clarify and create new realities, there always remains the danger that through the tropes we can also mislead, conceal, and create misunderstandings, and come to rely on clichéd thinking."

For his work in the areas of freedom of speech and the language of oppression, in 1991 the Western Speech Communication Association presented Bosmajian with its Bicentennial of the Bill of Rights Award.

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1. *The Language of Oppression*, H. A. Bosmajian, University Press of America, Lanham, MD, 1983.
  2. *Metaphor and Reason in Judicial Opinions*, H. A. Bosmajian, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 1992.

[Table of Contents](#) [Previous](#) [Next](#)



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