

Linguistic Violence and Cognitive Distortions in Adolescents with Reference to Performance Poetry

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 12

Special Issue: 1

Month: April

Year: 2025

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

Citation:

Chandran, Anu.

“Linguistic Violence and Cognitive Distortions in Adolescents with Reference to Performance Poetry.” *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 12, no. S1, 2025, pp. 18–21

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v12iS1-Apr.8927>

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Abstract

Linguistic violence occurs in various forms, such as bullying, insulting, labelling, abusing and attacking. Violence afflicted through language is as real and traumatic as that of physical violence. While words have the power to heal and uplift minds, it is equally charged with a destructive force that can break and hurt people when used to attack or alienate people. Linguistic violence through verbal abuse impacts the mental and emotional health of people. Though it affects the health and wellbeing of everyone who is subjected to its trauma, it primarily scars children and adolescents with a damage that is lasting. This paper looks into two antibullying performance poems discussing verbal abuse and linguistic violence. The types of violent speech acts addressed here are name-calling, insulting, labelling and bullying, and their adverse effects on the mental and cognitive health of the victims subjected to bullying is analysed and presented here.

Keywords: Linguistic Violence, Verbal Abuse, Cognitive Distortions, Mental Health

Introduction

Language can be used to dominate and restrict a social group as much as it can be used to empower and enrich them. Choice of vocabulary is basically made by everyday social usage. Most societies reinforce and normalize the use of such vocabularies in the mainstream society through institutions of socialization such as schools and the media. There are two types of linguistic violence in terms of the language use – the offensive language and the oppressive language. Offensive language has words and usages aimed to hurt a targeted individual or a group, psychologically or emotionally. Oppressive language, on the other hand, may or may not directly hurt someone; but it disseminates the harm of an oppressive socio-cultural system for a prolonged period of time. When an individual is the target of offensive language, he/she knows it when afflicted with the violence of offensive language. The type of linguistic violence discussed in this paper is offensive language used to insult, abuse and alienate.

The concept of linguistic violence is attributed to William C Gay and his theory on the forms of linguistic violence that he has classified based on the range and intensity of violence. Instances of violence in language is said to obstruct the ability of the process of meaning making, interpretation, comprehension and intelligence.

Judith Butler in her book, *Exciting Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, writes that “[t]o be injured by speech is to suffer a loss of context, that is, not to know where you are” (4). According to the inferences made by Charles Lawrence Jr., verbal attacks have injurious effects on the victim. They are “experienced as a blow, not a proffered idea, and once the blow is struck, it is unlikely that dialogue will follow” (452).

Material & Methods

The two antibullying performance poems used for the discussion of linguistic violence and its consequences in this paper are “Sticks and Stones” by Jon Jorgenson and “To This Day” by Shayne Koyczan. The qualitative methods employed here is the textual analysis of the select poems with reference to the concept of linguistic violence found in the offensive language of children’s jokes, and its negative consequences on psychological and cognitive health of children and adolescents.

Analysis & Findings

“Sticks and Stones” is a poem by Jon Jorgenson who is a pastor and a spoken word artist. Through the poem, he contradicts the ancient saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me”. The title of the poem emphasizes the misconception revolving around the idea of ‘sticks and stones’ which indicates physical assaults, and the poem reveals the real pain and trauma that is caused by hurtful language, which causes worse damage than sticks and stones.

The poem is a five-minute performance by the poet. The varied pace and tone of the poem implies the emotional intensity of the poet’s experience of being victimized. The tone of the poem indicates the poet’s venting of his pain and resistance against verbal violence and emotional abuse. The dark-coloured background of the poem also symbolizes the agony of the past and resistance against the trauma.

The poet begins with how he has been made fun of for his differences and interests at school. He recollects his experiences of being mocked at school in various grades by different classmates. While the poet was in the third grade, he was called ‘stupid’ by a classmate for writing ‘J’ backwards. In Jr. High school, he was insulted by another classmate who told him that a right punch in the face would swell him up to make his tiny nose normal sized. In high school he was abused by another classmate for doing theatre instead of football. He says he was called names that he does not dare repeat. These lines make it evident that such kinds of name-calling and humiliating against students with different abilities and interests are quite common in schools.

The following lines explain the intensity of trauma caused by verbal abuse, “And though you’ve never punched me in the face / Every syllable you speak stabs through my spirit / And hardens my heart (Jorgenson 00:01:01-01:10).

The name-calling and insults had adverse effect on him that is much worse than any punch in the face. The alliteration in the lines quoted above emphasizes the intended effects of violence. The poet would cry all night in the dark, choking his pain lest his parents hear his cries. All his days were spent believing the lies they talked about him, or what he would become, and he hated himself so much that he hid in the safest place possible, praying that nobody would notice the insecurity that had become his faith, body and life. The poet’s loneliness and struggle of dealing alone with the pain of abuse is expressed in the use of metonymy in the lines “no eyes has seen and no ear has heard” suggests (Jorgenson 00:01:30-32).

Here is another instance quoted from the poem of how language influences a person’s sense of identity and self-esteem, “Under the influence of your description of me / I learned to despise many things about myself / Not because they are so bad” but because if they were absent, the bullies would not have noticed them and would have been powerless (Jorgenson 00:02:04-11) The abuses

whacked his sense of self so much that he hid himself in trying to go invisible to others, and being complacent. He could not step out of his cowardice and live his life without fear.

The language of violence that the bullies use against the poet, who becomes a victim to verbal violence and the resultant self-loathing, is an instrument of institutional violence. The bullies use language as a medium to show off their power and dominance, and to belittle the victim, which in turn, shapes the behavior and consciousness of the poet, making him insecure, cowardly and hate himself.

“To This Day” is a viral anti-bullying poem by the spoken word artist Shane Koyczan. He describes the trauma of childhood bullying and victimization that he has experienced personally and witnessed in the lives of people known to him. The poem reflects on the widely prevalent verbal and physical bullying, harassment and discrimination that are violently growing in educational spaces, and the terrible long-term consequences of such insensitive speech and action. The poet recollects his experiences of being bullied, and depressed in the sequences of his life from childhood and adolescence to young adulthood. The title of the poem ‘To This Day’ is a phrase that means “continuing until today” according to the Merriam Webster dictionary. The title is appropriate for the poem in its portrayal of the impacts of bullying in the poet’s life till day.

The entire poem of To This Day is a deconstruction of the old proverb ‘Sticks and Stones may break my bones, but Words will never hurt me’. The poet goes on to explain the story of how he got his first nickname in school which was ‘pork chop’. He explains how much he hates pork chops to this day, which was once his favourite. It implies the lasting memory of being bullied interfering with his life beyond that incident.

Koyczan, through the below quoted lines, points out at the common misconception among people that words are powerless:

As if broken bones
Hurt more than the names we got called
And we got called them all
So we grew up believing no one
Would ever fall in love with us
That we’d be lonely forever
That we’d never meet someone
To make us feel like the sun
Was something they built for us
In their tool shed
So broken heart strings bled the blues
As we tried to empty ourselves
So we would feel nothing
Don’t tell me that hurts less than a broken bone (Koyczan 00:06:36-58)

Feelings of dejection, low self-esteem, inferiority and loneliness had consumed the speaker and those with similar experiences, at a very young age, making life a terrible punishment. They broke their hearts in the process of emptying it off feelings. They taught themselves not to feel or dream or desire. The agony caused as a result keeps growing with time and haunts their entire life. The poet uses the metaphor of an “ingrown life” to substantiate the lasting trauma of violence. While it may seem that an ingrown life can be cut away and will not metastasize, it really does. The same is the case of the pain which is assumed to subside with time, but deep within it keeps growing and spreading in life with greater intensity.

The poet recollects another girl, his friend, who also became a victim of bullying as a child, and how, to this day, she struggles to believe that she is beautiful. She was called ‘ugly’ when she was

just eight, studying in third grade. In the fifth grade, some students had stuck a sign on her bench that read 'Beware of Dog'. She had a birthmark on her face that takes up less than half of the face. Some kids said that she looked like "a wronganswer that someone tried to erase/ But couldn't quite get the job done" (Koyczan 00:07:42-46). To this day, despite having a loving family who thinks she is the epitome of beauty, she still does not believe that she is beautiful or worthy.

Koyczan compares schools to battlegrounds where students inflicted violence upon other students, and how they had to escape from the attacks in school where the number of attackers kept outgrowing the victims each single day. Having lost his parents at an early age and having been subjected to self-destructive abusive language hurled at him, the poet had a tragic childhood and adolescence. He started therapy and taking pills for depression when he was just in the eighth grade. He attempted suicides in tenth grade, and for a period of time, ends up being a bully himself to deal with his pain of being bullied. To this day, there are still millions of kids growing up being called names. The most common ones being 'stupid', 'spaz', etc. With time, the collection of names in schools keeps growing and are updated each year. The poet reminds that people should believe in their own worth. They should know themselves, look at themselves till they realize their strength and beauty, love themselves and grow.

Interpretation & Discussion

In both the poems, the effects of the abuse are well presented. In the first poem, the speaker says how he spent his nights crying over the names he had been called, and ridiculed. The words had evoked in him negative emotional response. He kept his pain to himself, without even sharing with his parents. That implies the level of insecurity words had built up in him. Believing the lies of the bullies, he was depressed and was hostile to himself. The poet says that still he could not care less about people and their words. In the second poem that discusses the devastating effects of bullying on childhood and adolescent, the poet addresses all the victims and uses the collective pronoun 'we' to speak on behalf of them, for them. He says that they are the people who made through it. Abusive names and offensive words did absolutely hurt, but life cannot stop. He tells the people that they should balance out all the pain with all the beauty; that they should let more beauty and less pain in their lives.

Conclusion

The impacts of linguistic violence are likely to be dismissed in a conventional society, considering it to be a casual and natural part of growing up in life. However, verbal violence is not merely a series of bad words to be ignored. It is as lethal and traumatic as physical violence. It is inferred that verbal abuse may have more lasting consequences than other forms of violence or abuse, as it occurs frequently and continuously. Adolescents who experience linguistic violence will experience negative consequences psychologically, physically and emotionally, which would affect the functioning of rest of their lives.

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