

Articles excerpted
from presentations to
the Media, Truth and
Reconciliation work-
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Language

Words

Journalists talk about translations, terms and meanings.

SOME of these perpetrators put people's penises in drawers and slammed the drawers, and our experience was that the newsreaders refused to use words like penis or vagina. So we had to say that ourselves.

I remember a woman who was severely tortured in George. Her breasts were slammed in a drawer, and her nipples split open. That night they didn't use it in the news. I phoned and asked them why, and they said it was just too cruel. We complained, and they said I must send the news item again. I did, and they used it at 11 o'clock that night when nobody actually listened. *Kenneth Makatees, SABC Radio*

THE WORD "victim" has its etymological root in early antiquity. It originally meant a beast selected for sacrifice, and is intimately tied up with the concept of a scapegoat. The sacrifice of the victim, or the exclusion of the scapegoat, would symbolically make the rest of the community safe from harm. When the victim was a person, it had, with few exceptions, to be someone young and very pure, or someone very old or a stranger. The ideal victim was someone who did not have deep roots in the community.

The origin of the word perpetrator — no surprise — has a far more positive connotation to it than a victim. So the word perpetrator comes from the word perpetrate, which means to accomplish, to achieve, to bring about, to effect. Its origin appears to lie with an action carried out. In the Latin origin, the word perpetrate and the word perpetrator could be either good or bad. And it is only much later that the English start using the word in the criminal sense, such as to perpetrate a crime, the perpetrator of a murder.

*Brandon Hamber, Wits University
Centre for the Study of Violence and
Reconciliation*

TELEVISION has very few black journalists reporting on the TRC, and the language used is a foreign language, English, especially when you look at the TRC special slot. The victims themselves are ordinary, illiterate people: do they really understand? Will they really reconcile and restructure the country and pull together with the perpetrators? Does the TRC look into whether the media is inclusive and able to bring two different worlds together? *Sophie Mokoena, SABC Radio*

Victim: innocent, blameless, passive, deserving of sympathy

Perpetrator:

malicious, evil, conscious actor

WHEN the whole process started, we had to create a language for it. We worked out what is truth and reconciliation in Xhosa, what sort of accent. We could not find the word in Afrikaans for perpetrator. People talk about "perps" — I mean they have a shortened version of it. There wasn't an exact word in Afrikaans. "Oortredes" is not necessarily the same as "perpetrator". We use in Afrikaans, "n skende van mense regte". *Antjie Krog, SABC Radio*

Victim: Death, lies, cover-up

Perpetrator: brazen, devious, secret

SABC Radio saw it as its public duty to cover the Truth Commission extensively in the majority of SA's languages. Radio has undertaken to become the channel through which ordinary people tell their stories and the history of our past across the barriers of language and race. Radio was also determined — to avoid giving Afrikaans listeners only the stories of the perpetrators and the Church Street Bomb victims, for examples. In the same vein we avoided giving Radio Xhosa only the stories of the Eastern Cape victims — the Cradock Four, Pebcothree and so on. We deliberately decided not to use the abbreviation — TRC, but the full-phrase "Truth and Reconciliation Commission", so that listeners were confronted with the word — Truth — and not the more comfortable TRC. *Kenneth Makatees, SABC Radio*

MRS KONDILE testified and used the words "they braaiied my son". We sent it through to Jo'burg and it was cut. So we phoned and they said "It's not braai, it's burned — because they didn't eat the child". We said: "That is not the point. For her it was as if they were eating her child. So you must use it." The person I dealt with said that as a Christian she refuses to write a bulletin with that in, or to broadcast it. That is why we prefer voice reports, where we say it. But then they prefer to use it at 11 o'clock at night, because they say they don't want to mix their breakfast and blood in the mornings. *Antjie Krog, SABC Radio*

AT UmAfrika, we experienced problems translating terms into Zulu, so we decided that we had to make our own. For names like hit squads, which came in the '80s, we came up with the term *abasocong*, to twist someone's neck. For right-wingers we came up with the word *untamo-lukhuni*, the stiff-necked. Third Force is *ingal'enoboya*, a hairy arm. Ambush is *lalela unyendle*, which means lying down waiting to do an evil act. We said let us come with the words, and introduce them to our readers. *S'Kbumbuzo Miya, UmAfrika*

Victim: someone who has suffered, needs counselling and support

Perpetrator: someone who has caused suffering, who is asking for forgiveness and sometimes shows remorse

NEW forms of journalism need to look at the very simplest cultural context of the majority: the people who make up the victims of what has happened in this country. And if we address concepts and values, they should be quite simple. For instance, one of the cultural bases of reconciliation, to resolve conflict, is called *ilala* — a grass blade for the palm wine. If you milk this grass blade, you get the palm wine. Traditionally, when two people had a problem, one would sit opposite the other. They hold the blade from the centre, and they pull it — milking. And as they milk, they confess to each other. You did this to me — you did that. People are there to watch that they do not engage in a physical fight. It is a dual until this blade is dry, and it must coincide with the dryness of the confessions from the heart. The symbolism of the blade gives you the equality. We are level as human beings. Afterwards there is a celebration that so-and-so opened up to so-and-so. The whole community will applaud that occasion. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission should be explained around such cultural symbolisms. *Kbaba Mkbize, SABC*

I often do coverage for the Sotho group which is Sesotho, South Sotho, Tswana and Pedi. It is very difficult for African languages to come up with the correct words or concepts, because our vocabulary is very limited. Most of the time we tend to put a phrase rather than a word itself. We interpret — like when we talk about a victim, we would say someone who has been affected. You tend to interpret the word rather than come up with the same word or a synonym. It is very difficult. *Sophie Mokoena, SABC Radio*

Victim: tears, women and helpless

Perpetrator: fat, white, male

I have a profound problem in distinguishing the terms "victim" and "perpetrator" because to me every word I write down actually counts for both of them. For example, I recall an instance in which the fat white male was the victim, as his child had been blown up. The only distinction to me is in the sound of the two types of hearings, and that is the legal sound that keeps on obscuring the tales of the perpetrators. That you don't find with the victims. *Antjie Krog, SABC Radio*