



WHY READING IS CONFUSING: Using Language to Create Ingroups and Outgroups

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Have you ever read the last line of a paragraph, stopped, and thought, “Wait, what did I just read?” This is a question I have frequently asked myself, especially as a youngster who was always getting in way over my head. In elementary school, I would choose a book from the school library that was clearly above my grade level, and my teachers would always give me a look as if to say, “Are you sure you can handle that?” I was driven to prove to them that I could.

Reading these more advanced books, however, was no walk in the park. I would have to reread some paragraphs several times and keep a dictionary handy. Sometimes I would simply skip sections that I didn’t get, only to admit to myself later that I had no clue what was really happening. I always felt that I was missing something crucial. What was I missing? *Why was it so hard to read?* As a grade-schooler, part of the answer might be that these books were geared towards a more advanced reading level; they simply weren’t meant for me.

The authors of those children’s books weren’t actively trying to confuse me, but they were writing to a group that I was not yet a part of. However, this exclusion can be intentionally designed by authors. Writers can choose to *obfuscate*, to make something unclear or confusing. They do this to play with words, toy with the mind, grasp at new worlds, or prohibit access to ideas. Obfuscation creates a boundary between those who understand what the author is writing about and those who don’t. There are those who are confused, the Outgroup, and those who are not, the Ingroup.

Though I am writing this assertively now, drafting this article was challenging. I reflected on my original inspirations for the article, talking about Jim Crow laws while reading Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* for a program, and I began to wonder: what are the different ways we as readers and writers can encounter obfuscation, and to what effect? It took a lot of working and reworking to come up with a coherent list that I’m not even sure is exhaustive, but what I decided was that how

we obfuscate can be broken down into three levels: word-level, syntax-level, and a combination of the two.

The first level of obfuscation operates on individual words and their meanings. How a word relates to its audience is crucial to understanding when we should use the word itself, a synonym, or a definition. For example, when we explain to our ever-nosy families what we have learned in school, we generally don't incorporate field-specific vocabulary. Dropping *homonormativity*¹ at the dinner table is a surefire way to make everyone take a sip of their drink simultaneously. Yet word-level obfuscation doesn't just apply to what we would normally call big words.²

Slang can operate in the same way. If I wrote a thesis on political theorists, I wouldn't expect to write about my interest in the topic to my audience of professors by saying that I was "vibin' on it." Even within slang, there are generational divides. Numerous think pieces exist on the Internet by baby boomers struggling to make sense of what the younger generations mean in their usage of abbreviations like "tbh" or "imo." Parodies of these articles take the confusion to the extreme and suggest that today's teens are talking in code about highly illicit topics like sex or drugs when really they're probably just talking about what someone did during homeroom. The confused parents are the Outgroup to the teens' Ingroup.

Language can also create Ingroups and Outgroups on the grammatical level. For example, obfuscation can occur through syntax, or word order, which "dictates how words from different parts of speech are put together in order to convey a complete thought."³ When I moved from the Pacific Northwest to the South as a kid, I often encountered phrasings that were different than how I would say something, but still added up to the same idea. For example, a Southerner might say, "I'm going to write me an *Inkwell* article." This doesn't mean they're going to write an article to themselves, despite the pronoun "me" being right after a transitive verb.⁴ Instead, it's just a different way to say that they are going to write an article. Here, the Outgroup is made up of people who are not from the geographic location as opposed to the Ingroup, which is made up of people from the area where this phrasing is common.

A more standard example of syntax-level obfuscation exists in poetry. Think about how Shakespeare might phrase something: "What light through yonder window breaks?"⁵ He puts the verb at the end of the sentence and suddenly it sounds fancy, but really, who talks like that? Maybe Yoda, but generally, in most varieties of English, the verb is kept super close to the subject; English doesn't have a case system that makes it apparent what the verb is modifying if it gets separated from the subject. The Outgroup member then is the reader who doesn't understand this play with syntax and

¹ Check out "[Homonormativity 101: What It Is and How It's Hurting Our Movement](#)" by Laura Kacere.

² For a complete list of big words, check out the various works of Vladimir Nabokov.

³ "[Syntax](#)," *Literary Devices*, accessed March 23, 2017.

⁴ A transitive verb is a verb that requires a direct object, or, in other words, a verb that says it's doing something to something.

⁵ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 2, Scene 2—that Shakespeare play you probably read in high school.

just doesn't get the line, whereas the Ingroup member is the reader who is enriched by their understanding of the unconventional syntax choice.

So what happens when both word- and syntax-level obfuscation are mixed? Entire pieces of text can then become prohibitively difficult for readers. What I find so compelling, and disturbing, is when this level of obfuscation is used maliciously. In a study conducted on the language of ballot initiatives, researchers found that voters were likely not to vote on a measure if the language it was written in was inaccessible, i.e. obscure and legalistic.⁶ Not everyone is versed in legal language, yet everyone is entitled to participate in their government in a democracy.

This obscure and legalistic language forces those who don't understand it into an Outgroup within their own government. Historically in America, these Ingroups and Outgroups have been codified by law, perhaps most reprehensibly in the case of Jim Crow laws. Jim Crow laws discriminated on the basis of literacy and were designed to prevent black communities from voting in the post-Reconstruction South.⁷ The laws were effective because black communities were disproportionately illiterate at the time; enslaved peoples were completely denied access to education, and later, discriminatory school funding, policing, and legal practices withheld resources from black communities.⁸

Yet this combination of word- and syntax-level obfuscation is not inherently malicious. While it's not a piece of writing, Beyonce's *Lemonade* is full of word- and syntax-level obfuscation for some listeners as it is largely grounded in experiences of black womanhood, black communities affected by Hurricane Katrina, and police brutality against black communities. *Lemonade* reclaims space within the mainstream music industry for those who have not historically been included within that space. As such, *Lemonade* serves a drastically different role than that of Jim Crow laws: while Jim Crow laws created an Outgroup based on oppression, *Lemonade* creates an Ingroup based on solidarity and shared experiences.

I appreciate *Lemonade* for its music and its valuable contributions to the industry, and, at the same time, I understand that I don't have the cultural position to fully relate. I learned through individual research, which included watching videos that discussed the visual elements, reading articles about the album itself, and conversations with friends who felt empowered by the album, that there was so much more to *Lemonade* than what a white boy could understand through his own experiences. As a kid reading those more advanced books, the obfuscation I encountered was easily overcome through perseverance; the only research required was going to the dictionary. Yet, the process of learning about how *Lemonade* operates allowed me to understand that not all things are made for every person, and I can respect that.

⁶ Shauna Reilly and Sean Richey, "Ballot Question Readability and Roll-Off: The Impact of Language Complexity," *Political Research Quarterly* 64, no. 1, 2011, 59-67.

⁷ For an interactive experience on the arbitrariness of Jim Crow laws and literacy tests, check out this PBS site: http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/voting_start.html.

⁸ Douglas Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name*, (New York: Doubleday, 2008). Blackmon offers a great discussion on how continuing systems of slavery after the Civil War played a major role in the denial of resources to black communities.

But not all obfuscation can be so easily remedied through casual research; the person who is denied the right to participate in their government because the language is inaccessible requires more than just a few definitions. So why is obfuscation even worth naming? Is it just so we can think about how we connect to our audiences or draw from the same body of experience that they can relate to? Perhaps naming obfuscation creates awareness around an audience. Who are we writing to? Who do we want to have access to what we are writing about? What do we want this access to do? For me, access should empower our audiences, not disenfranchise them. Learning that not everyone has equal access to everything is contrary to my upbringing as a privileged white male. I'm continuously trying to learn, understand, and apply awareness of my privileges more fully as I grapple with the complexities of oppression. And for me, a great way to learn about social justice is to learn about obfuscation.

