



Ugly History: Japanese American Incarceration Camps
Instructions for Classroom Activity 3
The Power of Words

Purpose: To help students think critically about the language used to name or describe experiences or events.

This activity examines how language shapes our perception of events and how it can be used to manipulate our thoughts and feelings. It is based on Densho's article on [Terminology](#) and explores the euphemisms used to describe the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II.

1. Have students watch "[Japanese Relocation](#)," a 9-minute film produced by the US government in 1943. As they watch the film, ask students to listen for the language that is used to describe the camps and the incarcerated and to think about the overall message that is being conveyed.
2. After watching the film, ask:
 - What kind of picture was the US government trying to convey with this film?
 - What elements did they use to paint this picture? (Answers might include language, music, photographs)
3. Share the following quote with students:

"Language shapes the way we think, and determines what we can think about."
Benjamin Lee Whorf, American linguist, 1897-1941

Words and language can influence people's perceptions of events.

4. Introduce the word, "euphemism," then give a definition: *"a mild or indirect word or expression substituted for one considered to be too harsh or blunt when referring to something unpleasant or embarrassing."* Oxford English Dictionary

Share some examples of euphemisms:

- “Let go” instead of “fired”
- “Passed away” instead of “died”
- “W.C” instead of “toilet”

5. Share the chart below:

Euphemism	More Accurate Term
Evacuation	Forced removal
Internment	Incarceration
Assembly center	Temporary detention center
Relocation center	Concentration camp
Japanese	Japanese American
Non-alien	Citizen

Discuss how each of the words in the first column is a euphemism to describe the incarceration.

Explain why the terms in the second column are more accurate. (See above link to Densho article on terminology for explanation of terms.)

Point out that the term “internment” has been widely accepted by public figures, scholars, textbooks, the media, and even some Japanese Americans, but that we use the term “incarceration,” because it’s more accurate.

6. Rewatch the US Government film, “[Japanese Relocation](#).” This time, ask students to listen especially carefully for euphemisms and to write them down.
7. After they have watched the film for the second time, ask students to write euphemisms that they heard on the Zoom whiteboard. Words might include: aliens, migration, evacuation, evacuees, pioneer communities, relocation center.
8. Discuss:
 - How were these words used in the film?
 - What kind of picture did they paint of the incarceration?
 - What are some euphemisms you hear in the news today? Perhaps provide an example, such as the “South Texas Family Residential Center” instead of “detention center” or

“concentration camp.” Additional examples: “ethnic cleansing” instead of “genocide” and “collateral damage” instead of “accidental deaths.”

9. Closing: Euphemisms are used all the time to “sugar coat” things that are happening in our country. One of the things that students can do to be vigilant citizens is to listen for euphemisms and think critically about the language that political leaders, “experts,” and the media use to talk about current events.

Additional Resource:

National Japanese American Citizens League, [Power of Words Handbook](#)

A few others to consider:

<https://www.radicalhistoryreview.org/abusablepast/forum-3-3-on-common-ground-concentration-camps-in-the-home-of-the-free-at-the-southwest-border-and-in-history-by-hana-c-maruyama/>

https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/enough-with-the-euphemisms-theyre-not-family-residential-centers-theyre-jails/2018/07/11/7e1eb22c-8399-11e8-8553-a3ce89036c78_story.html

<https://rewirenewsgroup.com/article/2016/11/22/word-history-japanese-internment/>