

LESSON

Words Matter: Listening to Survivors about Language for Describing Japanese American Incarceration

Overview

About This Lesson

In this lesson, students will be introduced to a number of terms frequently used to describe the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II. Students will consider how these terms have evolved over time to represent the experiences of survivors and their descendants. Students will also read language recommendations adapted from two Japanese American survivors' groups: Denshō and the Japanese American Citizens League.

Guiding Questions

- What are euphemisms and why might a government use them?
- Why is language choice important to our understanding of a historical event?
- What impacts can language choice have on survivors of a historical event?

Learning Objectives

- Understand that the words we use to describe historical events impact our reading of the past.
- Recognize the importance of listening to survivors when determining the appropriate words to describe their lived experience.

What's Included

This lesson uses the following student material:

- **Handout: Word Choice and Japanese American Incarceration**

Lesson Plan

Activities

1. Introduce the Concept of Euphemistic Language

Begin by asking students to imagine a time when they had to choose their words very carefully, or a time when they were not careful with their words and it had an impact. You could ask, “What was the situation? Why did you feel that your word choice was important? What effect did your word choice have on your audience?” Have students briefly share their experience with a partner.

Explain that when describing historical events, word choice is extremely important. Words can be used to diminish, excuse, or dramatize an event, or to clarify an event by incorporating the perspective of those who experienced the event firsthand.

Historians must continually ask themselves which words to use in their interpretation of an event. In the case of Japanese American incarceration during World War II, survivors have worked for years to promote use of the term “incarceration” to describe their experience. In this activity, you will explore why Japanese American incarceration survivor groups have worked for so long to change the language used to describe what happened to George Takei, his family, and more than 125,000 Americans of Japanese descent during World War II.

Display the following images. Explain that they come from the title screen of a 1943 US government-produced film created to inform the general public.¹



Using the [Think-Pair-Share](#) strategy, ask students to consider the word “relocation.”

¹ US Office of War Information, “Japanese Relocation” (film, ca. 1943), available from the [Internet Archive](#).

What feelings does the word evoke? What images does the word bring to mind? Why might the US government have chosen this particular word for the title of this film?

Emphasize any student comments that suggest that “relocate” is too soft a word for what happened to Japanese Americans. Introduce the term “euphemism.” Explain that a *euphemism* is a word or phrase that is deliberately chosen to weaken the impact of what it describes.

2. Contrast Language Choices

Break your class into groups of three and give each student a copy of the **Word Choice and Japanese American Incarceration** handout. Within their small groups, have each student select one of the numbered pairs of words on the handout to read and respond to in the space provided. Explain that after a few minutes, students will be responsible for teaching their peers in the group about the euphemism they studied and the preferred language from survivors’ groups. Allow about five minutes for students to read and respond to their row on the handout.

Then ask students to teach the other two members of their small group about the language in their row of the handout and explain their thinking about why the US government and the incarceration survivors’ groups would use this particular language.

Allow small groups time to discuss and complete all three rows of the worksheet, and then begin a full-class discussion about euphemistic language and historical word choice.

3. Reflect

End the class with a journal reflection. Share or display the following quotation from survivor and activist Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga:

“Words can lie or clarify.”

Ask students to first reflect on the quote in their journals, and then discuss the following questions as a class:

- Why is it important to examine language choice carefully when describing historical events?
- What impact can word choice have on survivors of a historical event?
- Why is it important to listen to the experiences of survivors and their descendants when choosing the language to describe a historical event?