AMONG THE NEW WORDS

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CONTENT WARNING: *Please note that this edition of "Among the New Words" covers banned words and taboo topics, including discussions of self-harm, eating disorders, suicide, rape, abortion, hate speech, sex work, and drug use in topical paragraphs and in personal accounts of these topics in the publicly posted examples included as evidence of usage in the full lexicographical treatments in the online supplement. Readers who are sensitive to these topics are advised to skip those sections.*

WHEN YOU POST ONLINE to social media, your content is monitored by the host company and/or government agencies. In certain national contexts, posts that are critical of the government or that could be interpreted as legally incriminating (e.g., requesting information about abortion access) may lead to consequences as serious as imprisonment. If you post nude photos or violent images or send explicit verbal abuse, such as death threats, you might be temporarily or permanently banned from posting or logging into your account. You may also be shadow-banned, that is, when you have not been officially notified that you have broken a rule but you realize that your view numbers have gone down suddenly because the algorithm is not showing your content anymore. What shouldn't you say? Is there a list somewhere? How do you get around these invisible walls?

There are no clear answers, no publicly available lists for TikTok creators, YouTube creators, or Twitch streamers to check their scripts against, so they avoid not only the obvious (swear words and mention of drugs, sex, self-harm, death, etc.) but also avoid its nearby neighbors (any mention

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of violence, race, mental health, queer issues, or other political topics), just in case. This leads to self-censorship in some cases but also to inventive avoidance of the words assumed to be on the no-fly list. The general phenomenon, which we will examine here, has been dubbed ALGOSPEAK (from *algo*rithm + *speak*), a term that has received some mass-media attention (Delkic 2022; Ifeanyi 2022; Levine 2022; Lorenz 2022; Showfety 2022; *Slate* 2023; Stoeber 2023).

In their research on linguistic self-censorship on TikTok, Calhoun and Fawcett (2023) identify seven categories of linguistic strategies that TikTok creators use to avoid algorithmic moderation (see also Calhoun and Fawcett 2022): use of nonletters, innovative phonological patterns, innovative use of morphology, lexical replacement, intentional spoonerisms, orthographic reanalysis, and phonotactic/prosodic templates. The strategies in these categories mirror strategies of self-censorship on other social media and strategies of language play more generally (e.g., puns, rhyming slang, and nonce words); their application on TikTok is shaped by the features of the platform, such as text-to-speech technology and automated captions. Strategies can be multimodal, multilingual, and multivarietal and can have multiple steps to their realization.

The use of nonletters is one of the most widespread strategies across digital platforms and includes: replacing letters with numbers or symbols, a strategy popularized as part of leetspeak in early online spaces (e.g., *$* for *S*); replacing words with emojis; and adding diacritics, spaces, or extraneous symbols on or between letters. Phonological innovation involves applying patterns that are attested elsewhere in the language to new contexts, like intervocalic voicing transforming *sexy* /sɛksi/ to *seggsy* [sɛgzi]. Because these innovations can draw on the entire sound system of a language, this strategy is unpredictable such that there is no "most common" example. Innovative application of existing morphology, such as English *un-* in the form *unalive* to mean 'kill', is less common than phonological innovation but is linguistically productive. (For more on *unalive*, see ATNW, *AS* 97, no. 3 [Aug. 2022]: 423.)

Euphemistic phrases like *grippy sock* 'mental health' (e.g., *grippy sock hotel* 'in-patient mental health facility') involve the strategy of lexical replacement, using a different word in place of an intended word, with the new word being selected based on semantic or phonetic (dis)similarity to the intended word. *Accountant* 'sex worker' and *accounting* 'sex work' have become popular terms based on their unrelated primary meanings. In contrast, *blank google docs* and *8.5 × 11s* 'white people' are popular terms that rely on the shared semantics of the referents ('whiteness'). Another lexical replacement strategy involves real or nonce replacement words that resem-

ble the intended word by matching syllable number, stress placement, and shared sounds (e.g., *hydrophobic* or *homophonic* 'homophobic').

Another word-level strategy is to make common spoken language "errors" by design, including mimicking the effect of spoonerisms by intentionally switching the initial sounds of two constituents (e.g., *woke smeed* 'smoke weed'). One orthography-based strategy is misspelling or omitting letters from a word to render it illegible to an automated detection system while keeping it recognizable to a human reader (e.g., *fck nzs* 'fuck nazis'). More sophisticated is the respelling of words with homophones (e.g., *beatySM* 'BDSM') or near-homophones (e.g., *jello slide* 'genocide') that can be real words in the language or not. Some creators use acronyms/initialisms as the basis for a new word (e.g., *LeG BooTy* 'LGBT') or conversely create an acronym/initialism from a word or phrase (e.g., *essayed* or *SA'd* 'sexually abused; sexually assualted'). (For more on *LeG BooTy*, see ATNW, *AS* 98, no. 3 [Aug. 2023]: 311.)

These strategies for avoiding algorithmic moderation are creative, productive, and linguistically insightful. They demonstrate social media users' explicit and intuitive linguistic knowledge. Intentional spoonerisms, for example, reflect not only an awareness of the phenomenon but an understanding of the phonotactics of the language (i.e., which sounds would be moved). These practices also point to the consistency of language play strategies across time and context: playful manipulation of sound, orthography, and meaning predate the internet, and resources introduced by digital media, like emoji, are used across digital platforms. Calhoun and Fawcett's research identifies social media users from marginalized groups (e.g., creators who are queer, disabled, and Black) as the primary innovators of self-censored forms on TikTok—a new iteration of novel linguistic forms moving from the margins to the mainstream of society once they are deemed "trendy" or otherwise socially beneficial to dominant groups. Though the prevalence of this phenomenon on social media makes the practice feel novel, self-censoring words related to race, gender, sex, and all the other topics in this issue is part of a long-standing and geographically widespread pattern of people modifying the way they use language—online and offline—to avoid detection in the face of hegemonic forces.

Much like how slang creates in-group and out-group divisions, algospeak is designed to keep some people in the loop and others outside of it. Unlike slang, algospeak as a linguistic practice is more than a set of individual words; it is a multifaceted linguistic system motivated, crucially, by issues of power—which makes it like "anti-languages" (Halliday 1976), designed to allow everyday communication among members of a marginalized group (e.g., thieves' cant, polari, verlan). However, some words that began

as algospeak have become lexicalized and now circulate more broadly as what some might consider "TikTok slang" or "Gen Z slang" (e.g., unalive). Because there is no standard list of words to avoid, users have to guess what might get censored and now often self-censor even when there may not be repercussions (e.g., replacing parts of seemingly harmless words with asterisks just in case or self-censoring on sites like Tumblr that do not monitor text). They proactively censor themselves because the effects that demonetization, content deletion, or shadow-banning would have on their engagement levels—and therefore on their livelihood—would be catastrophic and difficult to rebuild. There are few pathways to overturn a ban or jump back up into the good graces of an algorithm, even if the post was wrongfully flagged or reported. The trends move on without you. So, learn to express yourself syrup-tishu$lee with algospeak and stay on technology's good side.

Below, we consider algospeak in several broad categorical groupings: drugs, politics, queer life, race, sex, and violence and mental health. This is far from a comprehensive survey of the uses of algospeak, and within each category, we are only able to consider a handful of representative examples. As usual, full lexicographical treatments with citational evidence will be available as an online supplement at https://doi.org/10.1215/00031283-11186920. [Brianne Hughes, Kendra Calhoun, Alexia Fawcett, and Benjamin Zimmer]

DRUGS

The drug-related category of authority- and algorithm-avoidant terminology covers a variety of illicit practices and extends to free personal choice and disease-induced character traits. Many of the terms covered in this installment—especially terms related to race and queer life—stand on a lexical edge, simultaneously used to demoralize members of a given in-group and to reference belonging to that in-group. Restricting the use of such terms limits the self-expressiveness of certain groups under the guise of protecting them from directed hate language.

The terms in the drug category behave somewhat differently as most refer to explicitly illegal substances or practices—such as *oui'd/ouid* 'weed, marijuana' and ❄️ or 🎷 'cocaine'—and hate language against drugs and their users is widely permitted. The self-expressiveness of drug users is limited by state-employed algorithms seeking language use associated with criminal activity. Terminology employed to avoid the digital arms of Justice reflects common strategies used across time to obscure or soften messages. Strategies such as leetspeak are used to obscure even the superordinate

term *drugs* itself, appearing as *drovgs* and other variants, as Reddit user shutupplsdontk1ssme reflects: "I've said drugs as "dŕgś" in like 5 videos before and there never gotten taken down or got me banned."

We also observe a significant number of nature-themed emoji employed (with considerable overlap) to signify the marijuana plant (🎄, 🌳, 🌿, 🍃, 🥦); the marijuana bud (🍀, 🌿, 🍂, 🍁); the corporate term for the marijuana bud, flower (🌸, 🎄); the quality of the marijuana (⛽, 🔥); smoking marijuana (🌿, 🌬, 💨, 🔥); a joint used for smoking marijuana (🌿🚬); a bong or water pipe used for smoking marijuana (🤿); a dab used for smoking marijuana (🍯, 💎); the act of being stoned (🪨); and getting or being high (🪁, 🚀, 🤤, 😶) (see Colorado Harvest Company 2021; Esher and Gordon 2021).

We also observe overlap with the usage of other communities of smokers in 🛒 as rebus for 'vape cartridge', so-called carts. Several of these emoji conceal reference to old and new colloquial terms for marijuana and its associated behaviors and paraphernalia, like *joint* for a marijuana cigarette, *stoned* for being high, and *gas* for good quality, strong smelling weed—reflecting just how established the process of obscuring drug usage is in our collective linguistic production. Drug-avoidant terms also orbit a professional practice, not unlike the sex-avoidant terms covered below, and thus corner boys and neighborhood dealers exist in a lexical arms race with corporations who pull covert, in-group language into the consumer space, necessitating the in-group generate new terminology not only to stay in business but also often to stay out of prison. As the utopia of decriminalization remains unrealized, drug-avoidant terminology is predicted to remain a regular engine of new word formation and thus a space to watch for universal strategies of expression and censorship. [Kelly E. Wright]

POLITICS

Algospeak-style substitutions may have various social and political motivations. In oppressive regimes, social media and other online usage may be monitored by state authorities, with grave consequences for running afoul of regulations on politically sensitive language. A number of innovative and productive strategies have sprung up in such communities, as in the leetspeak-heavy reference to Iran (or *Ir@n*). In the case of Chinese political discourse critical of President Xi Jinping, there is constant reinvention of terminology, as old strategies are censored by authorities. Famously, there have been bans on allusive references to Winnie the Pooh based on humorous parallels to a resemblance to Xi (Hartman 2020) or even more allusive strategies such as soundalikes, as in 细颈瓶 (xì jǐng píng) 'narrow-necked

bottle', which when pronounced sounds like the infamous leader's name 习近平 (Xí Jìnpíng) (Feng 2020).

Even in the absence of such state-sponsored apparatus, obfuscating particularly charged words may help avoid targeting from those who may search for the use of such language. A recent such example is the use of the watermelon emoji (🍉) in social media posts supporting the Palestinian cause. The watermelon has been a symbol of protest for Palestinians going back to the Six-Day War in 1967, when the display of the Palestinian flag was banned in Israel, a ban that was only lifted with the 1993 Oslo peace accords. While the ban is no longer in place, the Palestinian flag has continued to be seen as a potential source of incitement by Israeli authorities. When 🍉 was added to keyboards in 2015, it was swiftly incorporated into posts about Palestinian subject matters and has been frequently used during the Gaza-Israel conflict (Avalle 2023). Additional algospeak tactics regarding the conflict include expurgating the name *Israel* (e.g., *Isr--l* or *blue and white country*, referencing the Israeli flag).

On the American political scene, certain kinds of obfuscatory coding may serve a variety of purposes for avoiding the attention that hot-button keywords may draw on social media and elsewhere. A noteworthy example occurred after the Supreme Court's *Dobbs* decision reversed federal protections for abortion. *Camping* soon developed as coded language for assisting those seeking out-of-state abortions, in states where reproductive rights have been curtailed. (For more on *camping*, see: ATNW, *AS* 98, no. 3 [Aug. 2023]: 300.) However, the practice of using *camping* as a substitution for "obtaining an abortion" has been criticized by activists who have described the use of coded language as "performative" and not as helpful as concrete action connecting people with abortion-rights organizations that may be able to assist them. Indeed, the effectiveness of such coded language, whether in China or the United States, is dependent on the language remaining undercover. As Kari Nixon of Whitworth University told *NBC News* regarding the *camping* substitution, "A code isn't a code if you tell everybody what the code is" (Sung and Goggin 2022). [Ben Zimmer]

QUEER LIFE

While LBGTQ people are increasingly visible in media and politics in the United States—with three notable movie studios earning "Good" rating when it comes to LGBTQ-inclusive films (Ellis 2023) and with a 13.6% increase in LGBTQ people elected to office last year (Migdon 2023)—being out as queer still leaves a person vulnerable to discrimination and abuse. This is a fact reflected in anti-trans legislation introduced in mul-

tiple states this year, including two dozen bathroom bills and 142 bills to restrict gender-affirming healthcare, and in the continued rise in violence toward LGBTQ folks (Barrón-López, Hastings, and Barajas 2023; Bennett, Norris, and Hastings 2023; Funakoshi and Raychaudhuri 2023). These circumstances, in addition to the need to avoid content moderation on TikTok and persistent playfulness, contribute to the wealth of algospeak terms relating to sexual and gender identity.

The various strategies outlined by Calhoun and Fawcett (2022, 2023) are employed in this category with the use of nonletters being especially prominent: *le$bean* 'lesbian', *qu33r* 'queer', *g@y* 'gay', *tr4ns* and *tr@ns* 'trans', *str8* 'straight', *c!s* 'cis', *nonbin@ry* 'nonbinary', *t3rf* 'terf', *h0m0phobic* 'homophobic', and *big0ted* 'bigoted' all replace letters with symbols or numbers. Misspellings are employed too, as in *gey*, *ghey*, *gäe*, and *gæ* 'gay' and *transgengar* 'transgender'.

Near homophones communicate 'homophobic' as *homophobe ick*, *homophonic*, and *hydrophobic*; and 'homophobia' as *cornucopia*. And the acronym *LGBT* has been reconfigured as *LeG BooTy*. (For more on *LeG BooTy*, see ATNW, *AS* 98, no. 3 [Aug. 2023]: 311.) Emoji are useful here too and are also lexicalized: 🫳 or the phrase *limp wrist emoji* means 'gay', as does 💅.

Lexical replacement yields *alphabet mafia* for *LGBTQIA+*. It's a playfully self-aware recognition of the ever-growing nature of the acronym and understood by some as a subtle nod to the power implied: "First we took over the rainbow. Then we took over the alphabet. Next up: the world!!" (polite_alpaca 2023). While there's speculation that *alphabet mafia* was coined outside of the LGBTQ+ community as a derogatory term, it's largely been embraced by those who identify as members of it. [Emily Brewster]

RACE

Race has always been a highly contentious issue in the United States. The documented rise in racially motivated hate crimes (Novotney 2023) and White Nationalist hate groups (Tischauser 2023) in the country within the past two decades reflects the ongoing ideological polarization around race.

The specter of being deemed so-called racist for bringing up race or critiquing Whiteness (see Bucholtz 2019) complicates even well-intentioned discussions of race online. In these conditions, many users from racially marginalized groups are hesitant to describe their experiences of racism and racialization; terms that describe their bodies, identities, and interactions (e.g., *people of color*, *racism*, *White supremacy*) may potentially be interpreted by content moderators as violations of community guidelines around offensive or hateful language and result in their content being

shadow-banned or removed. Words about ethnicity, nationality, religion, and other aspects of identity that are intertwined with ideas about race face similar issues.

TikTok has become a popular site for creative avoidance of these words because of the large number of users from directly impacted groups, the platform's culture of both sincere and humorous self-expression, and the many options for language production. TikTok creators from marginalized groups have transformed this lexical corral into a space for innovation. Terms like *knee grow* 'negro' and *nig nog* 'nigga' allow Black TikTok users to maintain in-group forms of address. *Palm-colored people*, *wypipo*, and *colorless people* name White people without using the term *White*, and *YT soup remassy* 'White supremacy' and *raycest* 'racist' facilitate discussion of discrimination with less concern for automated word detection. In addition to new written forms, race-related words may be replaced by emoji representing a wide variety of objects: 🥛, 🍗, and 🏳 frequently replace the word *White*, and 🖤 appears in place of *Black*. Use of emoji is not limited to color-based ethnoracial terms, also including clever substitutions such as 🥷 for *nigga*, playing on the phonetic similarity between *ninja* and *nigga* (and the ability to make the emoji ninja's skintone brown). These forms from TikTok exemplify the varied linguistic strategies—such as lexical replacement and orthographic reanalysis—that users employ to communicate about race without being deplatformed.

Though people who use racist language in public venues typically face at least minimal repercussions, explicitly racist language online is often ignored, if not actively fanned, by social media platforms' decision makers (Diaz and Hecht-Felella 2021). In contexts where racial harassment is normalized, social media users who express these ideas may not feel the need to censor their race-related terms. However, the use of emojis, creative spellings, and lexical innovations are not limited to racially marginalized creators and may be employed by those who hold the very racial ideologies the examples above are created to circumvent. [Kendra Calhoun and Kelly E. Wright]

SEX

The task of cataloging terms used to reference taboo parts of the body and the acts one engages in with those parts takes the lexicographer back to the origins of modern English. This observation begs many questions about the ways in which words become profane over time and the ways in which the objects and actions those words describe remain referenceable in polite or public discourse. Considering terms related to sex and sexuality as a

group, we can begin to consider why "changes in language catch on precisely because of the social functions they serve" (Bergen 2016, 149). Sex is one of the most basic human activities, and as the public expression of one's sexuality has become more common, it remains dangerous.

Cross-platform bans on terms related to sexual intercourse have introduced many new lexemes, including *seggs* 'sex' and its productive compounds, *seggsual*, *#seggsuality*, and the like (see White 2022), *noods* 'nudes', *corn* 'porn', and *essayed* (for the initialism *SA* 'sexual assault; sexual abuse'). Each of these algospeak terms employs the same phonological strategies as minced oaths, which (when spoken) sound rather similar to the word they are replacing but maintain enough distance to allow the user to avoid detection by content monitors (or "maintain plausible deniability" as Bergen 2016, 160, puts it). Algospeak lexemes often rise to prominence in response to a certain socially significant event, for example, in 2016 when the largest online pornography website, Pornhub, posted roughly a dozen corn porn videos to celebrate April Fool's Day. These videos featured titles like "got caught husking on the porch" and "hot young corn gets plowed" (Craggs 2016). Since, *corn* has replaced references to porn across the Internet's collected threads and underscores the ways in which everyday words can be marshaled into new waves of change.

Additionally, algorithmic avoidance of sexual terms reflects the existence of sex as both a profession and a crime outside of its universality. On July 25, 2020, TikTok user @rockysroad posted a video accompanied by an original song entitled "I'm An Accountant," the lyrics of which reveal the user has been employing this construction to publicly obscure his real profession—an actor—because no one asks accountants questions. Since, the phrase *I'm an accountant* has been employed by OnlyFans users "and other adult content creators to circumvent online content filters and IRL awkwardness when discussing their profession" (Rakshale 2022). The usage of this avoidance phrase has only spread (see TikTok Tushy 2020), with singer Iggy Azalea using the song in a September 4, 2020, video that was viewed over 23.7 million times in three weeks.

The suppression of sex- and gender-related discourses specifically harms sex workers and all sexually "othered" populations. Research conducted by feminist newsletter *Salty* found that Instagram suppressed not only content containing sex-related terms created by sex workers and educators, but also such content created by people of color, LGBTQIA people, and fat people (*Salty* 2021). These users report using expressions like *le dollar bean* 'lesbian' (derived from a text-to-speech reading of *le$bian*); *lesbian* is algorithmically identified as a pornographic category rather than a political identification. And as individuals create more avenues for sexual expres-

sion, means of constraining or demonizing such freedoms arise as well. In early 2021, FrontGate Media offered a "carefully curat[ed]" list of over 700 words that could be added to user-created blocklists across platforms, like Facebook. A cursory examination of this list reveals that over half of these terms reference sexual acts and the associated parts of the body, including all anatomical terms for the female anatomy, such as *nipple* and *labia*. Heavy censorship such as this encourages the development of avoidance terms such as *essayed* and the use of 🍇 for *rape* to reference sexual assault without referencing specific acts or traumatized body parts. Such examples not only highlight the linguistic creativity of social media users, but also underline the lack of nuance and oppressive qualities of corporate algorithmic content moderation. We state unequivocally that the body is not a crime and hope language users will share our enthusiasm and continue referring to it through all means of lexical formation necessary. [Maureen Kosse and Kelly E. Wright]

VIOLENCE AND MENTAL HEALTH

Death threats, doxing, and swatting are horrific realities of participating in social media semi-anonymously. Moderators will ban potentially violent or problematic language or disable comments under potentially divisive content to avoid it entirely, and in such cases censorship seems validated. Except. You need a way to talk about the dark side of life, and banning all mentions of death, murder, trauma, mental health, and eating disorders makes it hard for people on the edge to reach out and make connections when they find themselves in a crisis.

Many violent words are banned, which makes sense to ban or censor explicit violence and horrific cruelty from random posts and death threats. However, when the entire genre of death and dying is banned, people who have suicidal ideation or histories of trauma and abuse cannot talk about their shared experiences with other survivors either. Some common terms come from abbreviated content warning tags that help sensitive readers avoid unexpected mentions of self harm (*sh*), sexual abuse (*sa*), anorexia (*ana* or *rexxie*), and bulimia (*mia*).

Many of these euphemisms for murder, death, and suicidal ideation have been floating around for more than a decade, long before strict censorship around content was top of mind; they just fulfilled an increasingly common need for speakers. For example, *mukduk* comes from a 2007 episode of *The Office* (American version), where Dwight says that *R* is menacing and "that's why they call it *murder* and not *mukduk*." *Unalive* (covered

in ATNW, *AS* 97, no. 3 [Aug. 2022]: 423) was popularized from a 2013 *Ultimate Spiderman* cartoon where Deadpool uses it to avoid saying "the *k*-word" when explaining his murderous plan. This category is so large it cannot be covered here, but *pew pew*, 🔫, threatening to *past tense* (somebody), or avoiding bans by following up your death threat with the context of *(in Minecraft)* are all strategies being used to talk about it.

People also like to use death as hyperbole: "If I don't pass this class, I'm gonna die." "They're so cute together I could kill myself." Online, to avoid censorship, these phrases change into *kms* 'kill myself', *kermit sewer slide* 'commit suicide', and, as previously mentioned, talking about *unaliving* yourself or others. Talk about suicide is its own category. Even as people begin to move away from *commit suicide* toward *die by suicide*, the phrases *i'm gonna commit*, *i wanna kermit*, and *sewerslide* are popular facetious or genuine expressions of frustration and despair. The abbreviation *kms* 'kill myself' also appears commonly. The cultural hyperbole of jumping to suicide is its own conversation. [Brianne Hughes]

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