

Battle over words a reminder of inhumane treatment of foreign workers

October 11, 2015, By Daniel J. Bauer

Without a doubt, certain choices we make about the words we use really do make a difference. Language is important. Language matters.

A 14 year-old boy who lives near Houston, Texas recently noticed an odd wording in a textbook entitled "World Geography," published by a company called "McGraw-Hill Education." Ninth-grader Coby Burren was reading about "immigration" in north America, and was aware that it had to do with people picking up their lives in one place and moving on to another.

But, he wondered, "How do they move? And, why?"

Students from Taiwan move to many countries to advance their academic lives, but usually their intention is to return to their home land. We don't call our students abroad "immigrants." We move from one place to another when we enjoy the sites in China, Korea, Canada, New York, or San Francisco. But our journeys to those places do not make us immigrants. We go, and, presumably, we return home because, of course, we are tourists.

So, back to "World Geography," young Coby saw a map of the United States in his textbook. Various portions of the map were shaded in different colors. No surprise there. The words however that appeared beside the pretty map read: "The Atlantic slave trade between the 1500s and 1800s brought millions of workers from Africa to the southern United States to work on agricultural plantations."

The text spoke also of immigrants from European countries who "traveled" to the United States "to work," often under trying or patently exploitive conditions.

In the 1880s, my grandfather and his family were among those immigrants. He and the other Bauers with him came to live and work in the USA. For the record, they were not victimized.

Similar to what occurs in the Hans Christian Andersen tale, "The Emperor's New Clothes," often cited in Taiwan politics, it is a child here who opens our eyes to the truth.

Coby Burren noticed that peculiar wording, "to work on . . . plantations." He might be just a "kid" (a word like "worker," actually, because native speakers may use it selectively), but he is an intelligent child, (ah,

there's the right word). Young Coby saw the emperor's nakedness, and alerted his mother to the problem.

Were "millions of workers" brought from Africa to "work" on southern plantations until the middle of the 19th century, or were "millions of Africans" brought against their will, not to labor as salaried workers, but to labor as (such an ugly word) slaves?

Coby Burren's mother complained to the McGraw-Hill Education people, and thousands of others went public on social media to agree with her. With egg on its face, the publisher has now agreed to change the wording. A spokesperson acknowledged that, yes, Africans were "forced into migration and to labor against their will as slaves."

Forgive me for being such a nit-picker. I'd like the text to be more specific. It ought to be something like, "African men, women and children were forced . . ." because history shows children were highly prized as slaves, as well as adults. It is a pity the words are so offensive. Words can obfuscate, but words can also tell the truth. Sometimes we need the truth.

It would be irresponsible to let this moment pass without a remark about foreign workers in Taiwan. "Workers" was one of the words, after all, that pushed a 14 year-old to speak his mind.

Evidence shows that conditions for many of our foreign workers (from the Philippines, Indonesia and so on), especially care-givers for our sick and elderly, receive more humane treatment than they did in previous years. The plight of hundreds, perhaps thousands of care-givers in Taiwan remains, however, a national embarrassment. We as a nation should be ashamed of ourselves when too many among us lie about work permits, deny employees days off away from their places of work, confiscate passports and cell phones, and forbid workers to meet socially or for religious activities with others of their own countries. Too many foreigners among us labor not as workers, but as near slaves. Many fear to speak up for their rights. Many suffer silently.

Young Coby Burren, can you climb onto a plane and fly over here to take a look around? Can you help us speak for justice? (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points

- 1) The Q this column first discusses is the importance of certain words we use. Are you aware of Chinese words (or English?) that you avoid or are very careful of using because of their special meanings? (For example, in English, some native speakers use 'girl' / 'young woman' and 'child' / 'kid' and, for Taiwan 'country' / 'island' very carefully.
- 2) The #2 Q here is the treatment of foreign (care-giver) workers in Taiwan. How aware are you of the sadness of many foreign workers in Taiwan? Do you know any foreign workers personally? What are their experiences with us?
- 3) A 14 year old boy shocked millions of people by his insights and questions here. He saw that 'a worker' is not the same as 'a slave'. Do teenagers ever shock you?

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