

Metaphor Abuse in the Time of Coronavirus: A Reply to Lynne Tirrell

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Abstract

In the time of Coronavirus, it is as good a time as any to comment on the use and abuse of metaphors. One of the worst instances of metaphor abuse—especially given the recent epidemiological crisis—is Lynne Tirrell’s notion of toxic speech. In the foregoing reply piece—albeit brief though longer than another version—I analyze Tirrell’s metaphor and reveal how it blinds us to the liberating power of public speech. Lynne Tirrell argues that some speech is, borrowing from field of Epidemiology, *toxic* in the sense that it harms vulnerable listeners. In this response piece, I summarize the main points of Tirrell’s toxic speech argument, map the underlying conceptual metaphor and pose three objections: (1) Toxic speech is a hyperbolic metaphor; (2) toxic speech labelling is a rhetorical move more closely associated with activist messaging than philosophical inquiry; and (3) criticizing speech in a public forum for its toxic quality resembles moral grandstanding insofar as it (a) augments the status of the toxic speech critic and (b) shames the speaker for the purported harm their speech inflicts on the audience.

Keywords

Rhetoric – speech acts – epidemiology – activism – politics – language – discourse – criticism – metaphors

Some speech has the power to inflict serious, even critical, harm.
— Lynne Tirrell (2018, 117)

We need not be slaves operating blindly under the harsh influence of our metaphors.
— Mark Johnson (2008, 51)

In the time of Coronavirus, it is as good a time as any to comment on the use and abuse of metaphors. One of the worst instances of metaphor abuse—especially given the current epidemiological crisis—is Lynne Tirrell’s notion of toxic speech. In this reply piece,¹ I analyze Tirrell’s metaphor and reveal how it blinds us to the liberating power of public speech.

An Imagined Public Talk

Imagine a controversial speaker arriving at a college campus to give a public talk. The talk begins. The speaker starts a sentence, “The problem with homosexuality is . . .” The audience gasps in horror.² A critic stands up and declares, “This speech is toxic! I cannot sit here and permit the speaker to harm the homosexual members of the audience.” The majority of the audience claps in support of the critic, whose intention in stopping the speaker mid-sentence is to ensure that the vulnerable listeners are spared exposure to the harmful speech. The college provost shuts down the talk on the grounds that (1) the speech is harmful and (2) harmful speech should not be tolerated in a public speech forum.³

Lynne Tirrell has argued that some speech is, borrowing from the field of Epidemiology, *toxic* in the sense that it harms vulnerable listeners. In this response piece, I summarize the main points of Tirrell’s toxic speech argument, map the underlying conceptual metaphor and pose three objections: (1) Toxic speech is a hyperbolic metaphor; (2) toxic speech labelling is a rhetorical move more closely associated with activist messaging than

philosophical inquiry; and (3) criticizing speech in a public forum for its toxic quality resembles moral grandstanding insofar as it (a) augments the status of the toxic speech critic and (b) shames the speaker for the purported harm their speech inflicts on the audience.⁴

Tirrell on Toxic Speech

In the essay “Toxic Speech: Toward an Epidemiology of Discursive Harm,” Tirrell (2017) offers her initial account of speech toxicity. The notion that speech can be poisonous or toxic draws, first, on Epidemiology, the study of infections, diseases and how they spread. Some individuals are more vulnerable to the harm caused by, for instance, racist, sexist and homophobic slurs, while others show greater resistance. The epidemiological processes of uptake and susceptibility explain why damage caused by different types of speech vary across individuals, groups and entire populations. The second source of the toxic speech metaphor is Speech Act Theory, or the study of the performative function of language. “Some speech acts are of particular significance,” Tirrell insists, “because of their power to change ongoing practices, while others matter primarily because of the actions they license or engender” (142). Speakers opt into language games, make norm-guided moves within those games and, finally, exit and justify actions by reference to these past games.⁵

In the sequel article, “Toxic Speech: Inoculations and Antidotes,” Tirrell (2018) examines how toxic speech manifests in the larger social-political context and outlines several possible defenses. She expands the account of speech acts that harm from those with individual and immediate effect—e.g. to offend someone, defame someone, belittle someone or incite violence against a person—to longer-term social and political consequences and group effects: “Toxic speech includes speech that denies whole groups the power to participate, pits group against group, fuels polarization, undermines the foundations or core of a shared social world, and more” (122). Some of the defenses to toxic speech Tirrell

recommends are (1) improve people’s resistance to toxic speech by exposing them to small doses (“inoculations” in epidemiology) (132-3), (2) directly challenge toxic speakers (135-6), and (3) positively affirm harmed listeners’ dignity and boost their self-confidence (138).

Tirrell concludes with the declaration that the ultimate harm toxic speech poses to marginalized groups is in undermining their members’ sense of agency and so “[o]ur best defense will be to learn how to block and challenge speech we recognize as toxic and how to create a better civic rhetoric to reemphasize rationality and respect” (141).

Mapping the Metaphor

Toxic speech is a conceptual metaphor. Metaphors introduce new meanings into our thinking, language and reality.⁶ “Time is money.” “Love is a rose.” “Argument is war.” “This talk is toxic.” Metaphors compare two conceptual spaces for the sake of enriching the meaning of one (Knowles and Moon 2005). In Tirrell’s metaphor, the concept of toxicity (origin: Epidemiology) enriches the semantic content of the concept of speech that harms vulnerable listeners (origin: Speech Act Theory).

One way to gain a more nuanced understanding of a metaphor is to map or project its semantic content between two conceptual spaces (Lakoff 1993; Lakoff and Johnson 2003; Tendahl 2009). The expression *source domain* refers to the concept space from which the metaphor is drawn, here TOXICITY. The *target domain* refers to the concept space to which the metaphor is applied, here SPEECH.

Table 1: Toxic Speech Metaphor – Simple Mapping

SOURCE Domain (TOXICITY)	→	TARGET Domain (SPEECH)
Substances that HARM	>>>	Speech acts that HARM

What substances in the source domain share with speech acts in the target domain is the attribute of causing HARM (see Table 1). In Tirrell’s (2018) words, “[t]oxic speech, like any toxin, inflicts harm and threatens the well-being of those who are targeted by it” (118).

Table 2: Toxic Speech Metaphor – Complex Mapping

SOURCE Domain (Levels of TOXICITY)	→	TARGET Domain (SPEECH ACTS and harm)
Non-toxic	>>>	Harmless speech
Trace toxicity	>>>	Speech that insults, offends
Critical toxicity	>>>	Speech that damages reputation, defames
Chronic toxicity	>>>	Speech that harms well-being, racist/sexist/ableist
Acute toxicity	>>>	Speech that incites violence and physical harm

A more sophisticated mapping (see Table 2) indexes the source domain at multiple tiers depending on the level of toxicity (similar to Tirrell’s accounts), while the target domain indicates different speech acts arrayed by the extent of harm inflicted, from harmless to violent. Tirrell’s (2017) first account analyzes toxic speech at multiple levels, each corresponding to the degree of harm caused by the speech act. *Acute toxic speech* incites violence, such as when members of the Hutu clan referred to the Tutsis as “cockroaches” in the lead-up to the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Tirrell regularly invokes this example and the related epidemiological notion of *toxic mortality* (or as applied to speech acts, toxic speech leading to death) in order to reinforce her case that some speech acts do irreparable harm to vulnerable listeners (144, 157, 159).

According to Tirrell, *chronic toxic speech* is more pervasive than the acute variety, but equally harmful if permitted to fester over time. It includes racist, sexist, homophobic and ableist talk:

Chronic toxicity occurs in cases where toxins are tolerated at low levels, while their effects build up over prolonged, continuous or repeated exposure, damaging the body's functioning, sometimes also resulting in death. Arsenic poisoning [. . .] Lead poisoning [. . .] Constantly hearing sexist and racist comments can have a corrosive effect on the well-being of those targeted or described by the speech acts (148).

Similar to toxic substances, toxic speech harms highly susceptible or vulnerable individuals more than others. It can also escalate from chronic to acute.⁷ For Tirrell, hate speech epitomizes toxic speech because it manifests at these two extreme levels (acute and chronic) and, depending on its intended target, affects populations unevenly (149).

Objection 1: Toxic Speech is a Hyperbolic Metaphor

After mapping the metaphor and counting Tirrell's examples, chronic and acute toxicity emerge as the standard, rather than exceptional, cases.⁸ However, as an empirical claim, it is doubtful that chronic (racist/sexist/ableist) and acute (violence inciting) toxic speech are the most pervasive. Far more common in everyday discourse are speech acts that display trace (offensive) and critical (defamatory) levels of toxicity.

Tirrell's metaphor reveals why some speech acts are simply too harmful to warrant toleration in public discourse. So-called 'dog whistles' and dehumanizing speech are examples that litter her two articles. However, to call the most widespread kinds of speech acts that harm—offensive and defamatory—'toxic' exaggerates the comparison of speech and toxicity as well as the case for intolerance. Taking offense and believing that someone else's speech has tarnished a listener's reputation are common reactions in public speech forums. To shut down these forums in virtue of toxicity complaints would undermine the inclusivity, pluralism and viewpoint diversity that we have come to associate with vibrant public discourse.

Classifications of toxic speech are not always clear-cut. Sometimes the target of an offensive (trace toxicity) or defamatory (critical toxicity) message may, in the heat of the exchange, interpret it as a discriminatory slur (chronic toxicity) or a threat of physical harm (acute toxicity). A more acceptable response from an audience member who feels offended or defamed by a speaker is to exit the speech forum in protest.⁹ However, as the imagined public talk demonstrates, when toxic speech is the commanding metaphor, shutting down a speech forum becomes a viable alternative to walking out.

It is also difficult to anticipate the exact effects of toxic speech. As illustrated by the imagined public talk, a speaker's message may be justifiably challenged and cut short, before it is even fully communicated, if the stoppage prevents the listeners from suffering expected harm. Following the precautionary principle (i.e., take preventative measures even in the face of uncertainty), the toxic speech metaphor licenses anticipatory moves to shut down speech performances, even when the message's harmful effects are still unknown, anticipated (e.g., given earlier speech acts) or predictable (e.g., given the speaker's reputation).¹⁰ The threshold for intolerance, in other words, is surprisingly low.

Offensive and defamatory speech occupy a minor part in Tirrell's two articulations of the toxic speech metaphor.¹¹ Exaggerating the role of more extreme speech acts—specifically, chronic and acute—enhances the cogency of Tirrell's argument that some speech inflicts substantial harm on vulnerable audiences. Toxic speech is, simply put, a hyperbolic metaphor.¹²

Objection 2: Toxic Speech is Activist Rhetoric

Exaggerated metaphors appear in activists' rhetoric as part of a messaging strategy, particularly when activists seek to induce political, social or environmental change by humiliating or demonizing their opponents. A quick look at Saul Alinsky's (1971) classic

Rulebook for Radicals reveals how activists utilize symbols and metaphors to effectively mobilize support for a cause and strategically resist a shared enemy. Rule 5 states that “Ridicule is man’s most potent weapon” (132). Rule 13 indicates how best to deploy these symbols and metaphors: “Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it” (134). Labelling the enemy’s speech as ‘toxic’, highlighting the speech’s adverse effects and ridiculing the enemy for harming innocent listeners likewise serves the activist’s objectives.

While there are plenty of examples of hyperbolic metaphors in activist rhetoric, I will focus on only one for the sake of space: “serial environmental rapist.”¹³ The purpose of this rhetorical construct is to brand someone who regularly and purposefully harms the natural environment as being the equivalent of a repeat sexual offender. Serial rapists force their victims to have sex with them, in full knowledge that the act is morally wrong (not to mention illegal) because it (i) is an affront to the victim’s integrity, (ii) negates the victim’s right to withdraw consent and (iii) harms the victim. Does the metaphor hold up when the natural environment, not a human being, is the victim? Unless you are a Deep Ecologist, the natural environment lacks integrity, the capacity to consent and the same rights of a human being to seek redress for harm. So, the metaphor, albeit shocking and rhetorically effective, breaks down under rigorous analysis. The same is true of Tirrell’s toxic speech metaphor.

Also, activists or so-called ‘social justice warriors’ are not always concerned with either justice or truth, even though they claim otherwise. In Michael Huemer’s (2019) brief piece “My Problems with Social Justice,” he remarks that “[w]hat is noteworthy [about social justice warriors] is their *lack of concern about the truth* – e.g., the lack of interest in waiting to find out what actually happened, in doing the basic investigation of the facts of a case [. . .], and the almost total lack of regret for attacking innocent people.” Activists will often judge and leave the matter of warranting the judgment until later or not at all. Likewise, when

labelling speech as ‘toxic’ and thereby shuttering a public speech forum, the critic shows little concern to verify that the speaker’s intention was indeed to harm or that in fact the full expression of the speech act would have damaged audience members had the talk been permitted to proceed to its conclusion. Instead, the activist passes straight from the toxic speech judgment to silencing the speaker. Such a hasty move from judgment to action discloses a lack of critical thinking, particularly if what is meant by critical thinking is the ability to suspend judgment until the facts have been verified and all parties are afforded a fair hearing (justice).¹⁴

Objection 3: Toxic Speech is Moral Grandstanding

Toxic speech is not only a hyperbolic metaphor more suitable for activist messaging than philosophical inquiry. It is also tantamount to moral grandstanding.

In their essay “Moral Grandstanding,” Justin Tosi and Brandon Warmke (2016) argue that some forms of moral talk are “repugnant” or “bad for the practice of moral discourse” (198). Tosi and Warmke define one form, moral grandstanding (or simply grandstanding), as follows:

. . . grandstanding is a use of moral talk that attempts to get others to make certain desired judgments about oneself, namely, that one is worthy of respect or admiration because one has some particular moral quality—for example, an impressive commitment to justice, a highly tuned moral sensibility, or unparalleled powers of empathy. To grandstand is to turn one’s contribution to public discourse into a vanity project (199).

Toxic speech labelling resembles moral grandstanding insofar as the critic typically aims to demonstrate their “highly tuned moral sensibility” in calling out harmful speech and their “unparalleled powers of empathy” in identifying and protecting the targeted audience members. The purpose of the toxic-speech-critic-qua-moral-grandstander is to stop the harm from ensuing, defend the perceived victim(s) and shame the alleged assailant.

The public evaluation of certain speech acts as toxic is itself a moral claim, specifically a condemnation of the speaker and the message as posing a danger to vulnerable audience members. However, public discourse can go horribly wrong when words are perceived as weapons, speakers as attackers and listeners as their victims. One problem already alluded to in the imagined public talk scenario is the emergence of pre-emptive policing. Some critics wish to eliminate the toxic speech act before it can cause harm, so they anticipate the full expression and stop its communication mid-sentence (or mid-talk). Of course, it is always possible that the full expression would have differed from the expression that the moral grandstander anticipated. Even if mistaken though (recall that the activist has no concern for truth), the moral grandstander profits. By pre-emptively identifying what is thought to be toxic speech and shutting down a speech forum, the toxic-speech-critic-qua-moral-grandstander is rewarded with the attention and adulation befitting someone who has, metaphorically-speaking, prevented the outbreak of a pandemic.

Final Thoughts

‘Toxic speech’, similar to ‘serial environmental rapist’, is a hyperbolic metaphor. It is more typically found in the discursive quiver of a political or environmental activist than that of a philosopher. Calling speech ‘toxic’ is also a form of moral grandstanding, expressing outrage and piling shame on a speaker. The critic aims to gain status and impress those audience members who already disagree with the speaker’s message. In the ears of an uncritical mob, the toxicity label becomes an instant rationale for silencing a speaker. “What he is saying is toxic!” is an activist’s cry, a moral condemnation, a dog whistle and, ultimately, a death sentence for the speaker’s message.

One of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s many insights about language games is that participation in them demands so-called ‘hinge’ propositions, statements accepted by game

participants without which communication would be made difficult if not impossible.¹⁵ A hinge proposition in academic forums and public discourse is that more speech is a public good, presumptively silencing some speech is a public bad, and those value judgments should prevail even at the risk of tolerating some speech that is clearly noxious.¹⁶

In the same way economic and political elites can utilize anti-defamation laws to stifle criticism and journalistic inquiry, the status-seeking heckler can label speech as toxic in order to undermine the transmission of unpopular or politically-incorrect ideas. In the spirit of an officiating heckler, the American Philosophical Association and the Committee for Public Philosophy (currently chaired by Tirrell) sought to make speech forums safe spaces for public philosophers.¹⁷ However, as they soon discovered, philosophers (as well as non-philosophers) will vigorously disagree and no official statement by an academic association (or one of its committees) will stop them from deploying uncivil or toxic speech.¹⁸

In conclusion, attempting to model messy—even purportedly toxic—public discourse after a rule-bound, politically-correct graduate seminar is a doomed project.¹⁹ In the time of Coronavirus, when lives are at risk from the spread of real contagion, it is perhaps better that we jettison Tirrell’s flawed metaphor altogether. The effect of pervasive toxic speech labelling would be to chill free expression, interfere with the open exchange of ideas, shut down opportunities for exploratory discourse and destroy the liberty so vital for citizens—as well as public philosophers—to engage in wider policy debates. If we perpetuate the myth that some speech acts are so dangerous that they do not warrant toleration in public forums, then we become slaves operating blindly under the influence of Tirrell’s faulty metaphor.

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ENDNOTES

¹ A shorter version of this paper, titled “Against the Toxic Speech Metaphor: A Brief Reply to Tirrell” (2019), can be found at

https://www.academia.edu/40230994/Against_the_Toxic_Speech_Metaphor_A_Brief_Reply_to_Tirrell

² This imagined public talk is based on an actual university campus talk that I heard, given by Richard Dawkins at California State University Long Beach in 2000. The sentence and the audience reaction were identical to those in the imagined public talk, but a critic never stood up, accused the speaker of harming vulnerable audience members and facilitated the end of the talk. Instead, Dawkins clarified his meaning (the problem was how to explain homosexual behavior among non-human animals, not why human homosexuality is morally problematic) and the talk went on without any difficulties.

³ In 2016 and 2017, several speaking engagements by conservative intellectuals and provocateurs, such as Charles Murray, Milo Yiannapolous and Anne Coulter, were either disrupted by audience members exercising the Heckler’s Veto or cancelled in advance for fear of violent campus-wide protests.

⁴ In a prior public philosophy piece, I outlined a more rhetorically sharp and less analytic reply. See Ralston (2017). In the present piece, I do not include an alternative, or a positive proposal for how to remedy Tirrell’s flawed metaphor.

⁵ According to Tirrell (2017), language games are not free-for-alls. Speakers cannot say whatever they like, escape accountability for their utterances and excuse the actions that those utterances subsequently warrant. “Speakers are responsible for actions their licenses engender beyond the game” (143). Though public speech performances resemble a game, impunity ought never to be an option.

⁶ In *Metaphors We Live by* (2003), George Lakoff and Mark Johnson explain how novel conceptual metaphors emerge in our thinking and language, constructing (and reconstructing) the world around us: “New metaphors have the power to create a new reality. This can begin to happen when we start to comprehend our experience in terms of a metaphor, and it becomes a deeper reality when we begin to act in terms of it. If a new metaphor enters the conceptual system that we base our actions on, it will alter that conceptual system and the perceptions and actions that the system gives rise to. (145).

⁷ In an interview with Skye Cleary (2017), Tirrell outlines the multiple levels of toxicity she has in mind: “Toxins don’t all function the same way. Some act acutely, like polonium, and kill with a single dose. Others are sub-acute, taking time to do their deadly damage. And still others are chronic, not killing but impairing the well-being of the one targeted. Racist and sexist speech are modes of delivery of racism and sexism. They’re like arsenic.” In the complex mapping of the metaphor, sub-acute toxicity encompasses chronic, critical and trace.

⁸ Between Tirrell’s two articles, the most common examples are the rhetoric in Donald Trump’s 2016 election campaign, speech used by the Hutus to describe the Tutsis in the 1994 Rwandan genocide and the perversion of language during the Nazi regime, almost all of which indicate chronic and acutely toxic speech.

⁹ In democratic theory, the matter is often framed as a choice between voice or exit. According to Mark Warren (2011), “An alternative to voice is exit: Dissatisfied members may choose to leave a group rather than voice their displeasure” (684).

¹⁰ See Schauer’s (2009) discussion of how the precautionary principle licenses pre-emptive moves to shut down speech forums that could lead to violence.

¹¹ Throughout Tirrell’s two articles (2017/2018), I could find a total of three examples of offensive (trace) and defamatory (critical) speech acts, but they were hybrids involving racist/sexist (chronic) speech as well.

¹² Indeed, Tirrell (2017) concedes in the opening of her first article that her claims will likely be perceived as exaggerated: “To many, this claim [that some speech is toxic and therefore intolerable] may seem hyperbolic, but even a sketch of the concept of toxic speech dispels the hyperbole” (140). Unfortunately, the hyperbolic quality of her account returns once the metaphor is mapped and rigorously scrutinized.

¹³ For a recent case in which this rhetorical construct was deployed by environmental activists, see Diacono (2019).

¹⁴ According to John Dewey (1910), the “essence of critical thinking is suspended judgment” (74).

¹⁵ Such hinge propositions are not subject to justification. To insist otherwise initiates an endless regress that blocks progress. See Black (1999) and Putnam (1994).

¹⁶ In a speech given at the Central University of Europe, the President of the University of Chicago Robert J. Zimmer (2019) makes the case for this same hinge proposition: “In truth, many people, perhaps even most people, don’t really like free expression in all its complexity. They fully support and are deeply committed to free expression for people they agree with. But tolerating speech that they may find offensive, dumb, morally questionable, politically objectionable, producing discomfort, or religiously undesirable is not something everyone naturally embraces. In other words, one reason we can see constant effort to constrain academic freedom and open discourse is that some people are trying to keep certain views unexpressed and unheard out of self-righteous moral or political indignation, an agenda driven by such moral and political views, and comfort arrogating themselves and those they agree with the right speech while denying it to others.” Similarly, the hyperbolic metaphor of speech toxicity undermines open discourse and the free exchange of ideas.

¹⁷ The two bodies jointly issued a statement against “bullying and harassment”—in other words, against toxic speech—citing incidents in which philosophers were harassed and even physically threatened because of their public-facing writings (American Philosophical Association 2016).

¹⁸ The intramural spat between gender-critical and transgender-supportive philosophers demonstrated that the quest to sanitize (or de-toxify) public discourse, even within the philosophical community, often proves pointless. For a summary of the debate, see Flaherty (2019).

¹⁹ Richard Posner (2004) has made a similar point about designing deliberative forums on the model of an “academic seminar.”