

Abuse of Science. This book argues that the language used by postmodern theorists is difficult to understand precisely because it is without meaning:

What is worse, in our opinion, is the adverse effect that abandoning clear thinking and clear writing has on teaching and culture. Students learn to repeat and to embellish discourses that they only barely understand. They can even, if they are lucky, make an academic career out of it by becoming expert in the manipulation of an erudite jargon. After all, one of us managed, after only three months of study, to master the postmodern lingo well enough to publish an article in a prestigious journal. As commentator Katha Pollitt astutely noted, the comedy of the Sokal incident is that it suggests that even the postmodernists don't really understand one another's writing and make their way through the text by moving from one familiar name or notion to the next like a frog jumping across a murky pond by way of lily pads (p. 206).

WHAT ARE LANGUAGE CRITIQUES?

In a semifinal round of a major college tournament a few years ago, one team read a piece of evidence using the word *blackmail*. The opposing team at that point chose to abandon every other argument in the debate round and launched a language critique argument based on a claim that the word *blackmail* uses a white is good/black is bad stereotype. The negative team won the debate with the argument that the opposing team should be punished for using a word that perpetuates a racial stereotype. In the world of the language critique, the most obvious offenders are teams using racist or sexist language (*policeman* rather than *police officer*, *he* rather than *he or she*, and so on).

The philosophical background for the language critique arises from two primary sources: the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis and postmodern deconstruction. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis refers to the early twentieth-century work of Yale University linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf. The hypothesis holds that language structures thought.

Deconstruction—the philosophical brainchild of Jacques Derrida, Paul De Man, and postmodern theorists—attempts to search in the corners of a text (in our case, meaning evidence cards) for indications of cultural biases and presuppositions. Defenders of deconstruction believe that oppressive structures attempt to hide themselves in language but that a careful critic can spot the vestiges of these structures. This explains why a language critique might seem to react to a single chance word or expression in such a vehement way.