

Exploring Meaning: Insight into the Semantics of Slaughter and Harvest

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## **Exploring Meaning: Insight into the Semantics of Slaughter and Harvest**

### **Introduction/Need for Research**

General semantics has been described as the study of the relationship between language, thought, and human behavior (Berman, 2001). Korzybski (1994) has characterized the word “environment” as those things outside and around us. As agricultural scientists and educators our environment affects our language. The books we read, the movies we watch, the radio programs we listen to, and the websites we visit help to contribute to the pictures we create in our head when we hear words (Rumble, Holt, & Irani, 2014). Individuals who have similar environments have been known to create the same meaning for words. However, those pictures or meanings inside of us also have the potential to differ greatly for people whose environment is not similar to ours. It is important to explore the meanings people place behind the words agriculturists use. Temple Grandin proposed using the word harvest to describe the process of moving animal from farm to market is not transparent (Grandin, 2013). She believes that using the word slaughter is a more accurate portrayal of the process, and the industry should not be sanitizing the words we use when talking to the public. The need to determine the words that accurately describe the process of farm to market is required to communicate as transparent as possible. The purpose of this study was to understand the participant’s perception of the words harvest and slaughter and how the meaning they place behind the words changed after the completion of an animal harvest lab portion of a course. The understanding of what word most accurately matches the process will allow for agricultural educators and communicators to more effectively increase the public and policy maker understanding of agriculture and natural resources (Doerfert, 2011). Using words that accurately depict the process will allow educators to better represent this aspect of the animal agricultural industry.

### **Methodology**

Students enrolled in an introductory animal science with an animal harvest lab component at a university were used. The class location provided greater insight and context into animal agriculture. More importantly to this study, it allows students to experience the harvesting process first hand. Participants of this study represent a wide variety of backgrounds and majors, as many departments use this course as an upper level science credit. The course allows for students to learn about the process of harvest/slaughter and voice any concerns before experiencing the process in person. It should be reported that the general consumer does not have access to facilities to witness the harvest/slaughter process. This may affect the transferability of the results. However, the purpose of discovering the term that best describes the harvest/slaughter process must include the participants experience with the process. The present study used qualitative methods and semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was developed; however, the strength of using a semi-structured interviews allows the researcher to create a conversation with the participant while ensuring that the same general areas of information are collected from each person interviewed (McNamara, 2009). To meet the research questions, the participants were asked general demographic questions, their involvement with raising animals, and their prior experiences to the animal harvesting/slaughtering process. To ensure dependability of the data, the researcher summarized the conversation and the participant confirmed the content of the interview as a form of member checking (Kreuger, 1998). The researcher transcribed each of the interviews and assigned a pseudonyms for each participant to ensure confidentiality. The interview transcripts were then analyzed and coded using the constant comparative method. The researcher used axial or open coding to develop

themes and categorizes for the data (Glaser, 1965). Themes created by organizing the data into similar meanings, words, and phrases. Credibility and accuracy were ensured in the data analysis, as two researchers analyzed the data individually. Afterwards, using the methods of peer debriefing, the two researchers compared and contrasted their results (Huberman & Miles, 1994).

### **Results/Findings**

Five of the participants enrolled in course, because it was a required course or counted toward their science elective. One participant took it voluntarily. All of the participants indicated they were not immediately involved with production agriculture. For example, Deborah indicated, "My granny lived on their farm. She was the last to live on a working farm."

The participants had varying levels of prior experience with the slaughter/harvesting process. Four of the participants had little to no knowledge of the harvest/slaughter process. Alex explained, "I went in their blind. I just knew how we picked up the meat at the market." However, two of the participants reported being somewhat familiar with the process. Alana reported, "I was somewhat familiar with it. I didn't know the whole process."

Participants indicated that before completing the course, they thought of killing when they heard the word slaughter. Alana went into more detail, "Slaughter, that word's negative. It's morbid, slaughter. You picture a lot of blood." Alex said, "Slaughter, Killing." Harley explained, "I knew that as an animal term." Before completing the course, participants heard the word harvest and did not think of animal harvesting or never knew that word was associated with the agricultural animal industry. Harley was unclear about the definition of harvest when she explained, "I never saw it as a term used for animals, because I was around orchard and vegetable and all of that kind of production I saw it as a word used with vegetation never animals." Shannon discussed, "Honestly, I thought of not animal harvesting, but vegetable harvesting."

Four of the participants indicated that after completing the course that harvest and slaughter mean the same thing to them. For example, Harley explained, "Slaughter, I see the same thing [as harvesting]. How the meat gets from point A to point B." On the other hand, two participants felt the terms were different. Alex reported that harvest and slaughter do not mean the same thing when he said, "I think of [slaughter as] having to kill the animal and then you harvest it." Alana said, "You still think about plants whenever its harvest, you don't feel to think about harvesting meat."

### **Conclusions**

At the beginning of the course, participants with no prior background in production animal agriculture had two different definitions of slaughter and harvest. Agricultural educators must be aware of the meaning associated with these words. Since there were two different definitions, educators should use the word slaughter to accurately describe animal processing. This finding compliments Grandin's (2013) suggestions of using only slaughter to describe the transition of animals from farm to market. The findings of this study also suggest experience with animal harvesting/slaughter provides a greater understanding of the process and allows participants to use the terms interchangeably. Therefore, educators should be aware that a higher level of transparency between animal processing images and the public allows for the words harvesting and slaughter to be synonymous. Future research should look at the association of agricultural words with meaning and if these words meet the individual's perceived stereotypes.

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