J. Traffic Med (1999) Vol 27, No 1-2

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Leonard Evans

973 Satterlee Road
Bloomfield Hills, MI 48304

Frank Haight's interesting commentary *The Semantics of Safety* (Haight 1998) provides fascinating background on the history of a number of safety issues. He particularly focuses on whether traffic incidents that harm property or living creatures should be called *accidents* or *crashes*, and cites my editorial (Evans 1993). I confidently rely on readers to form their own judgments about Haight's claim of inconsistencies in that editorial.

My advocacy (Evans 1991; 1993) of using *crash* rather than *accident* was not related directly to the interesting history Haight describes. Rather, it was aimed at contributing to my expressed goal that "safety research might in the future acquire more of the method, style, values, attitudes, and institutional structures which have proved so successful in the traditional sciences" (Evans 1991, p. 375). One goal in any technical undertaking is to use terminology that is clear, specific, unambiguous, and concise. Language used by the general public in casual conversation does not normally dictate the terms adopted in technical fields. To many, *accident* does imply that the unfortunate event was due solely to bad luck, so that there is no responsibility to be assigned or lessons to be learned.

Haight's grappling with the definition of *accident* underlines the very vagueness and ambiguity that should exclude the term from technical discourse. He suggests *accident* indicates "cause unknown". However, what is unknown today may be known tomorrow. To refer to *The Accident of Pan Am Flight 103* is to invite ongoing renaming with definitive closure difficult to attain, as different individuals gradually become convinced at different times that the event did not fit their individual definitions of *accident*. Referring to it exclusively as *The Crash of Pan Am Flight 103*, reflecting usual aviation safety practice, avoids pointless complexity and confusion.

While one cannot predict an individual crash, no more than one can predict what seed will grow and which will not, or which light bulb offered in a store will have the longest life. Although randomness abounds, being drunk influences crash risk just as certainly as watering influences germination rates and voltage influences light-bulb life. When the light bulb fails early, we have a situation of an unpredictable undesired outcome which seems to fit the definition of *accident* yet would not normally be so called.

An unsuccessful player of a round of Russian roulette would not normally be described as dying due to an *accident*. Yet such a death can have features in common with a traffic death. If any of many factors

had been different (the gun had been picked up a little earlier or later, the chamber had been spun a little faster or slower, etc.) the outcome likely would have been different. The probability of not being hurt in a round of Russian roulette is 5/6 or 83% (actually higher because the influence of the bullet's weight on chamber dynamics). A very drunk driver travelling 100 miles in less than an hour likewise has a high probability of being unharmed. As the situations are conceptually parallel, the language describing them should likewise be parallel. Hopefully, no one would want to define a range of terms, depending on specific values of probability.

While some may dismiss the whole issue as much to do about nothing, others have offered cogent reasons why calling *crashes* crashes reduces the number of crashes. No one has claimed that calling *accidents* accidents decreases the number of accidents.

If Haight's concerns flow from the behavior of individuals who advocated not using *accident*, then the behavior and not the terminology should be the issue. Terminology should be judged on its merits as it relates to use today. The objections to *accident* are many, substantial and convincing compared to the few rare cases in which the use of *crash* is awkward.

REFERENCES

Evans, L. Medical accidents: no such thing? (editorial). British Medical J: 307: 1438-1439; 1993.

Evans, L. (1991; reprinted 1996, 1998) *Traffic Safety and the Driver*. New York, Van Nostrand Reinhold. (Copies may be obtained directly from the author).

Haight, F.A. The semantics of safety. J. Traffic Medicine 26: 67-71; 1998

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Evans and Haight are correct in raising our attention to the use and meaning of words in scientific publications. The connotation of "accident" in the context of causality of automotive crashes is just one of many issues arising in the international publication of research, and reliance on English to describe our findings.

I am reminded of something we did years ago to have an automotive safety brochure translated into Spanish. There was a section dealing with crash tests and their use in assessing the performance of occupant restraints. Although I don't speak Spanish, one section in the translation caught my attention, as the discussion on the Hybrid III dummy was translated to "Hybrid III stupido." While a literally correct translation, it obviously conveyed an incorrect meaning.

We need to be sensitive to a more precise use of words. The trend in use of crash in place of accident is a step toward that precision.

Return to List of Publications

SSS HOME