

# The word 'coconut' just like 'ape' or any other word is neutral; we give it its meaning

by Anthony Dillon

**N**ow that the dust has settled somewhat on the recent racism claims, I thought I would offer my thoughts. Events like what happened recently will continue to happen in the future, so it is worth commenting on.

How many people have been angered, disgusted, etc., during the last couple of weeks regarding stories on racism in the popular media?

That's an easy question to answer. Now here are two more questions that are less easy to answer, for some people at least anyway.

**First**, how many people have been angered, disgusted, etc., during the last couple of weeks regarding the unreported, but widely known at least, reports on violence in remote Aboriginal remote communities?

**Second**, how many people think they are actually doing something worthwhile for Aboriginal people when they take their 'righteous' stand against racism involving some sporting and media stars?

I am going to suggest that there is a better way of dealing with racist language than the current way of punishing those



Sydney Swans captain Adam Goodes from Anthony Dillon's perspective, shouldn't have reacted the way he did to being called an 'ape' by a 13 year old Collingwood fan. Image: AAP

who speak the racist words. The focus of this opinion piece is on verbal racism.

Yes, I acknowledge that it exists and have never denied that it does exist. What I question is the popular belief that the intended targets of verbal racism have no choice in how they respond. It is assumed they have to be victims of some sort.

Different commentators

have argued that the recent 'culprits' did not know what they were doing, while others believe that they did.

Recently on The Drum, one writer associated history with the term 'ape', which demonstrates (in his opinion) that it is definitely a racist term when used in the context it was recently used.

For the recent 'ape' incident there is certainly

mixed beliefs and ambiguity, even among Aboriginal people, as to whether or not there was a racist intent. To illustrate the position I take, I wish to use an example which is unequivocally meant to be offensive.

The term 'coconut' when directed at an Aboriginal person in this country is used with the intention of upsetting, offending, or silencing

them because they hold views which a few others, or even many, believe do not represent the 'Aboriginal view'.

When it is used, those with Aboriginal heritage – and many non-Aboriginal people – know exactly what it means: 'someone who is brown on the outside, but white on the inside'. It is not meant as a compliment; it is meant as an insult. I have often been called a coconut. I have a choice in how I respond. I can either play the victim and claim that I am hurt or offended, or I can choose to be totally unaffected by it. I choose the latter.

However, many choose to be offended, not consciously, but because they have been conditioned to value other people's opinions of themselves more than they value their own opinions of themselves.

To be upset because someone calls me a coconut (and I've been called worse) is to let others have more power over my emotional well-being than I have over it myself. It is actually disempowering.

Further, the word 'coconut' just like 'ape' or any other word is neutral; we give it its meaning.

At one time, the term 'golliwog' was considered okay, but now, there are some who see it as offensive and find the dolls themselves 'offensive' (how I will never know).

For example, Queensland's Sunday Mail (20 May 2012) Page 2

reports that Indigenous elder, Mr Weatherall said the dolls were offensive and should be banned.

Members in my family often use the term 'golliwog' as a term of endearment and affection.

If someone wants to give a word a negative meaning, that is their business. As the intended target of assumed racist words, I am happy for others to have their opinion and I do not need to them to agree with me. When called a coconut, I can simply reply with "Thank you very much for your opinion". Incidentally, coconut is my very favourite gelato flavour.

While choosing not to be offended can be difficult at first, it becomes easier with time and when we begin to understand the motives of the 'racist'. Does someone who truly feels good about themselves ever engage in racism or abuse of any kind? I don't believe so. Those who feel good about themselves see others as equals. They see oneness and connectedness with one another. So it would seem that someone who engages in racist or abusive acts is really someone who does not feel good about themselves.

The racist feels disconnected from others. Why should we be upset by the words of someone who does not feel good about themselves?

Very few things are more painful than the emotional torment

experienced by someone who does not feel good about themselves, that is, someone with low self-esteem.

To feel disconnected is emotionally painful. Rather than be angry or upset with the racist or abuser, I feel sorry for them. I am not saying people don't have the right to be upset when they are called a name which is intended to offend. I am just saying that they don't have to be upset.

Further, I am saying it is disempowering. When I make these claims, the usual criticism received is "Yeah but then you are letting others just get away with calling you names". I have two responses. Firstly, if the words of others don't hurt you because you value your opinion of you more than you value their opinion of you, then they are not really getting away with anything. They just end up looking foolish. Secondly, if a racist's words have no effect on the target, then there is no reward for the racist and they will simply give it up.

Much like the flasher who was laughed at and confronted with "Is that all you've got 'peanut man'?" by the little old lady - he felt stupid, ran away, and never exposed himself again. The other response I receive is "Yeah but that word has a negative history associated with it".

To me that simply means that the intention associated with the word

today is the same that has been for quite some time.

So what? For me personally, an associated history in no way validates the claim that the word has the power to hurt you. If someone has an explanation for how it does, then please tell me.

If someone engages in racist/abusive acts because they are insecure, then controlling what they can say will likely only result in them finding other ways to express their insecurities.

The racist may be insecure, but their intended targets don't have to be. That is all I am saying.

In this opinion piece, my motivation has been to offer advice which I fully believe is empowering for those who are confronted with verbal abuse or racism. For Aboriginal people and members of other minority groups to believe that they are victims because of words spoken by others is fundamentally disempowering.

To focus on issues like these detracts from the more serious issues of physical abuse and neglect, poverty, unemployment, etc. which plague some Aboriginal communities. Proof of such distraction is evident in that Aboriginal politician, Bess Price, gave a speech recently to the NT parliament on violence in Aboriginal communities. It barely registered in the media.

I wonder why?

Let's focus on what matters most.