DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 16.06.2025 | Ana Palacio

Trump's newspeak threatens us all

Trump's war on language doesn't just shake US politics — it threatens global discourse. The world must reclaim words before meaning slips away

Some 2 500 years ago, Confucius was reportedly asked what he would do first if granted absolute power. 'I would rectify the names of things', he replied. Changing the language used, he suggested, would enable him to guide 'affairs' and ensure that 'punishments and rewards' were 'appropriate'. Confucius understood that language is not merely descriptive, but prescriptive: by shaping thought and discourse, it determines actions and outcomes.

Now, US President Donald Trump is attempting to leverage language to his own ends. Since his return to the White House, he has issued a wave of executive orders aimed at 'rectifying' the language of governance in America. This includes barring the federal government from using terms like 'diversity', 'equity', 'inclusion', 'climate crisis', 'gender identity', and other terms related to sexual and racial identity, which he argues perpetuate a damaging 'woke' ideology.

With these Orwellian orders, Trump is directing outcomes by reshaping narratives, shifting priorities and erasing inconvenient truths. Banning the term 'sustainability' banishes environmental concerns. Prohibiting all mention of 'diversity' obscures systemic inequities.

Ripple effects

While some of Trump's decrees align with public opinion – for example, a 2023 survey showed that a majority of Americans reject the idea that there are more than two genders – the overall impact is to undermine, politicise and discredit existing concepts and valuable lines of intellectual and scientific inquiry. In other words, Trump is constraining Americans' ability to analyse, learn, improve and engage in the kind of open and informed discourse that a well-functioning democracy requires.

Already, Trump's linguistic crackdown has enabled the Department of

Government Efficiency, led by Elon Musk, to terminate 85 government contracts, collectively worth an estimated $1 billion, tied to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), as well as accessibility, often on the basis of AI-conducted word searches. All references to climate change have been purged from government websites. Research grants that mention 'climate' or 'racial disparities' have been frozen. Museums that promote inclusive narratives, such as the Smithsonian, have been threatened with funding cuts.

As Confucius predicted, these changes are having ripple effects. Corporations like Walmart, Meta and McDonald's have scaled back DEI programmes, fearing retaliation from the Trump administration.

This mirrors a broader trend: major banks and funds, from Goldman Sachs to JP Morgan, have distanced themselves from sustainability commitments, wary of the political and legal backlash.

BlackRock CEO Larry Fink used to be a vocal advocate for incorporating environmental, social and governance (ESG) considerations into investments. In his 2020 letter to CEOs, he stated that 'climate risk is investment risk', noting that 'sustainability- and climate-integrated portfolios can provide better risk-adjusted returns to investors.' In 2021, he mentioned ESG four times, highlighting the 'sustainability premium' enjoyed by companies with 'better ESG profiles'. But Fink's recently published letter to investors included nothing about ESG or sustainability, focusing instead on 'energy pragmatism.'

This mirrors a broader trend: major banks and funds, from Goldman Sachs to JP Morgan, have distanced themselves from sustainability commitments, wary of the political and legal backlash. The Dow Jones Sustainability Index – which long set a global standard for corporate environmental and social responsibility – has been rebranded by its owner, S&P Global, as the 'Best-in-Class Index'.

A chance for European leadership

These changes are not merely cosmetic; they signal to investors that sustainability is no longer a priority. And their impact is likely to reverberate well beyond the US, affecting institutions, corporations and academic research worldwide. After all, America's economic dominance grants it outsize power to influence linguistic norms in English, the lingua franca of global discourse.

Already, Europe's extreme right – exemplified by Germany's *Alternative*

für Deutschland (AfD), France's National Rally and Spain's Vox – is echoing Trump's rhetoric, disparaging 'woke' concepts like diversity and sustainability. The AfD is known for dismissing sustainability policies as symptoms of a 'hysteria' that is burdening German industry — a sentiment that resonates with its growing base.

Trump's linguistic campaign may also influence European companies and research as a result of direct pressure. US embassies across Europe sent letters to firms and other entities that do business with the US government, demanding that they certify that they are not running DEI programmes.

The English language is a shared tool, but it bends to America's political will, which means that Trump's linguistic warfare threatens the entire international community, which must preserve the integrity of essential concepts. The key is not to find new ways to discuss them, but rather to reclaim their names and position them as universal ideas whose meanings transcend partisan political agendas.

To reclaim the words that Trump is trying to erase requires substantive policies, such as a binding EU sustainability framework that enforces corporate ESG compliance.

The European Union – which loves nothing if not naming things – is the obvious candidate to take the lead. But the European Commission has remained silent so far. Not a single high-ranking EU official has issued a strong response to Trump's attacks on language. This is a major missed opportunity for Europe to show principled global leadership at a time when it is seeking to bolster its 'strategic autonomy', and to ensure that the concepts it is defending are not empty.

As its seemingly endless proclamations on 'green transitions' and 'inclusive growth' attest, the EU talks often and effusively about sustainability and inclusion. But it often lacks the resolve needed to turn talk into action. To reclaim the words that Trump is trying to erase requires substantive policies, such as a binding EU sustainability framework that enforces corporate ESG compliance.

Just as Trump's lack of commitment to NATO has prompted a long-overdue political awakening in Europe, his attacks on the language of sustainability and inclusion should catalyse Europe's efforts in both areas — and its assertion of global leadership more broadly. The alternative – allowing Europe's future to be shaped by internal populist forces and external manipulation – is a formula for deepening vulnerability and greater fragmentation. After all, when words lose their meaning, they lose

their power to inspire and unite.

© Project Syndicate



Ana Palacio
Madrid

Ana Palacio, a former Spanish foreign minister and former Senior Vice President of the World Bank, is a member of the Spanish Council of State, a visiting lecturer at Georgetown University, and a member of the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on the United States.