

Ortholexia Nervosa

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The Greek prefix “ortho”, which means straight, or correct, is used, in a wide array of upright causes, to create useful words. While orthopedics and orthodontics denote the science of straightening of bones and teeth, orthorexia implies a focus on eating healthy food.

At times, however, excessive concern for correctness can lead to disease and dysfunction. One such example is orthorexia nervosa, which is an unhealthy focus on food intake. Persons with this eating disorder are obsessed with the quantity, quality, pedigree, and purity of their meals. They spend enormous time and energy evaluating their diet, and end up restricting their nutrient intake. Paradoxically, this worsens clinical outcomes, including of biological, psychological, and social health.

A similar condition relates to language in modern medicine. We term this as ortholexia nervosa. It may be defined as an excessive, and obsessive focus on using the “right” words and phrases in spoken and written language, which impairs quality of communication. Ortholexia nervosa may act as an impediment to health if professionals tiptoe around using seemingly right language, rather than focusing on medically meaningful outcomes.

A focus on “person-first” language in medicine is welcome, but not when it leads to grammatically unwieldy phraseology (“the clinical challenges of the closely knit caregivers of person living with clinical obesity”). Efforts at ortholexia may fall flat when forcibly extrapolated to other languages, which follow different rules of syntax and grammar. Both clinicians, and the people whom they serve, would be more satisfied with “ortho management” (appropriate care) than mere ortholexia.

A similar situation is noted in the meta medical field, or the larger ecosystem. Journalists and social media influencers have taken ortholexia to Brobdingnagian boundaries. Avoiding use of innocuous adjectives, nouns and pronouns, that have served us well, may seem “woke” or “wise” to some. However, this approach upends centuries of successful communication in one stroke. Examples include replacing or white washing words that denote a particular national, ethnic, religious or gender identity. These are signs of ortholexia nervosa. What harm do the words “obese”, “Indian”, “rich” or “male” do, if they add weight and richness of expression to spoken or written language?

Current efforts at promoting polite and respectful language are certainly welcome. However, focusing only on this, while neglecting scientific or journalistic correctness, will create an Orwellian debate of newspeak versus oldspeak, and end up in doublespeak! It is the intent of communication which matters, not merely the content. This is what we emphasize, to ourselves, and our readers. Read the content, in context, for clarity and comprehension. Discourage ortholexia nervosa before it paralyses our thoughts, our words and our action.

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SUGGESTED READING

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