

A Semiotic Analysis of Anti-LGBTQ + Politically Motivated Hate Speech

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Article history

Received: 22-05-2025

Revised: 22-10-2025

Accepted: 29-12-2025

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Abstract: Hate speech is speech that targets vulnerable minority people and groups, intended to denigrate their identity. Although hate speech has persisted for generations, its use against LGBTQ+ citizens has increased significantly since the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Hate speech is distinct from other critical rhetoric as it is both socially and politically motivated speech meant to marginalize and/or promote discrimination against a targeted minority population. Symbolic language is often utilized to obscure the direct meaning behind specific derogatory terms or phrases. This political tactic allows for the obfuscation of the implied meaning to allow the speaker to appear as if they are speaking from the moral high ground rather than simply using slurs to disparage a group of citizens. This creates a preferred self-deception by the speaker that mythologizes the object of that speech. The use of such terms has spread across social media as a means for some to express their opposition to legal and societal acceptance of LGBTQ+ civil rights. To decode this symbolic speech, this research utilizes semiotic phenomenology to analyze and illustrate the obscured meaning signified in anti-LGBTQ+ hate speech.

Keywords: Semiotics, Phenomenology, Hate Speech, LGBTQ, Propaganda

Introduction

In 2022, the state of Florida passed the “Parental Rights in Education” bill, which many detractors refer to as the “Don’t Say Gay” bill. This piece of legislation, heavily promoted by Florida Governor, Ron DeSantis, bars all discussions of sexual orientation in public schools from grade 3 and below. This piece of legislation is one of many identified anti-LGBTQ+ legislation that has swept through the United States with almost 500 examples at the state level (American Civil Liberties Union, 2023). According to Miller (2023), USA Today reported that, as of this writing, “lawmakers in 46 states have introduced more than 650 anti-LGBTQ bills” (para 2).

In March of 2022, Governor DeSantis’ press secretary Christina Pushaw stated in a tweet that, “[t]he bill that liberals inaccurately call ‘Don’t Say Gay’ would be more accurately described as an Anti-Grooming Bill” (Migdon, 2022, para 2). In another related tweet, Pushaw announced that, “If you’re against the Anti-Grooming bill, you are probably a groomer or at least you don’t denounce the grooming of 4–8-year-old children”

(Migdon, 2022, para 3). What is most striking about this official statement in support of this piece of Florida legislation is the use of the term “groomer,” which has become a commonly used slur by supporters of anti-LGBTQ policies meant to increase marginalization. Across the US in the state legislatures and school board meetings, LGBTQ people have been labeled as “groomers” by right-wing conservatives, a term used by sex offenders to “initiate contact with their victims” (Associated Press, 2022, para 2). The “groomer” slur is hate speech that has become synonymous with the debate on LGBTQ civil rights and the demands to censor any reference to non-heterosexual identities in public schools, as well as the broader society.

Hate speech is an unfortunately common and ever-present phenomenon in society (Izquierdo Montero, 2022). One that can cause everlasting and even generational harm. Regardless of its target, hate speech is meant to marginalize and demean people based on one or more characteristics of their group identity. Gelber (2002) argues that “hate-speech-acts can be identified as raising validity claims which enact discrimination and support

inequality". What Gelber is suggesting here is that such utterances are a form of conduct, meant to perpetuate the act of discrimination.

Whether it is race, religion, or sexual identity, hate speech is asserted from the speaker's perceived position of superiority. Their assertion of superiority inversely presents the targets of that speech, the "other," as inferior. In a practical sense, hate speech is a linguistic method to assert class dominance of the speaker over the target of their speech. This linguistic power expression denigrates the target and subjugates them to a lower social status, fit for discrimination. Often, hate speech emerges out of the population, organically, when a dominant group feels status in that community is threatened by the increased equality of the minority group (s), as if civil rights are a finite resource. If such speech is either adopted or utilized by political leaders, the speech is transformed into strategic political narratives. In politics, much of the conflict between the two sides of a political contest where language becomes a tactical fight over values (Seargeant, 2022). As such, the use of hate speech as a political strategy is meant to draw supporters to their cause, and to provide a target or scapegoat for perceived social, economic, or political problems.

The Politics of Hate Speech

Hate speech refers to any form of communication, whether verbal, written, or symbolic, that promotes or encourages discrimination, hostility, violence, or prejudice against individuals or groups based on attributes such as their race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender, sexual orientation/identity, disability, or other legally protected characteristics. Hate speech often employs derogatory language, stereotypes, or misinformation to demean or dehumanize targeted individuals or communities, fostering a climate of intolerance and potential harm based on ideas or theories of one group's superiority over another (Baider, 2022). Waldron (2012) maintains that the purpose of hate speech, and its publication, is intended to undermine the dignity of the target group, both in the speaker's eyes and the eyes of others. The use of hate speech becomes a "strategic" utterance when an individual makes derogatory statements about a group they wish to denigrate, as amoral or inferior, to another who does not identify with this group, is an attempt to recruit someone to support the speaker's views. These sorts of populist strategies often involve deep emotions, such as hatred and fear (Bankov, 2020).

It's important to note that the definition and legal boundaries of hate speech can vary from one jurisdiction to another, and what may be considered hate speech in one context might not be in another. Laws and regulations regarding hate speech are also subject to change over time, reflecting evolving

societal norms and values. In many liberal democratic societies, there is a delicate balance between protecting freedom of expression and addressing the harm caused by hate speech, and this balance is often a subject of debate and legal interpretation. It is also important to note, regardless of the insidious nature of hate speech, in the United States it is considered a form of speech protected by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. However, such speech may serve as linguistic evidence related to documented discriminatory conduct, hate crimes, as well as other crimes targeting vulnerable and marginalized minority groups. Therefore, hate speech's legal status in the US is grey, rather than black and white.

From Phenomenology to Semiotic Analysis

Phenomenology and semiotics are two distinct philosophical and intellectual traditions, but they share connections, particularly when it comes to understanding human perception, interpretation, and meaning-making. Here's an overview of how phenomenology is linked to semiotics.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach that originated in the early 20th century with thinkers like Edmund Husserl and later developed by philosophers like Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. It focuses on the study of subjective experiences, emphasizing the description and analysis of how individuals perceive and make sense of the world. Phenomenology aims to uncover the structures and essences of consciousness, exploring how humans experience phenomena and assign meaning to them. "The belief in the reality of the world implicitly informs and permeates our everyday life" (Smith, 2016). Therefore, a person's use of hate speech may represent that individual's subjective worldview regarding other individuals or groups.

Semiotics

Semiotics, on the other hand, is a field of study that originated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, primarily associated with the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce. What Jonathan Culler (1981) refers to as the "science of signs" (p. 19). Semiotics is concerned with the study of signs and symbols, examining how signs function as carriers of meaning and how they are used to communicate and convey information. It encompasses various aspects, including syntax (the structure of signs), semantics (the meaning of signs), and pragmatics (how signs are used in specific contexts).

The Connection between Phenomenology and Semiotics:

- 1) Perception and Meaning
 - Phenomenology investigates how individuals perceive and experience the world, while semiotics' focal point is on the nature of signs and symbols and their role in meaning-making
 - Together, they explore how individuals interpret and derive meaning from signs and symbols in their lived experiences
- 2) Intentionality
 - Phenomenology emphasizes intentionality, which refers to the directedness of consciousness towards objects and experiences
 - Semiotics recognize that signs have meaning because of their relationship with other signs and their reference to objects or concepts. This relational aspect aligns with the intentionality of phenomenology
- 3) Language and Communication
 - Phenomenology acknowledges the importance of language in shaping and expressing subjective experiences
 - Semiotics provides a framework for understanding how language functions as a system of signs and symbols for communication
- 4) Semiotic Phenomenology
 - Some scholars have developed a subfield known as "semiotic phenomenology," which seeks to bridge the gap between these two approaches
 - Semiotic phenomenology explores how signs and symbols are embedded in and shape lived experiences, examining the interplay between language, perception, and meaning (Zlatev, 2018; Lanigan, 2007)

This research discusses this relationship because phenomenology and semiotics are connected through their shared interest in understanding human consciousness, perception, and meaning-making. While phenomenology focuses on the subjective experience of the individual, semiotics provides a framework for analyzing how signs and symbols are used to convey meaning in both personal and cultural contexts. These fields can be complementary when studying how humans make sense of the world and communicate their interpretations within their own lived experiences. This is true for both face-to-face interactions and virtual/social media interactions.

For some, the use of hate speech, whether directed at race, religion, immigration status, sex, or sexual identity, are expressions of how those individuals understand the world. Both cognitively and experientially. These utterances indicate how those people or groups view

and/or perceive the targets of that speech and both what their characterizations mean to them and what those people or groups represent to them.

Methods

This research employs semiotic phenomenology as the guiding methodology, combining phenomenological description of lived experience (speech acts) with semiotic analysis of signs, signifiers, and their cultural meaning. The goal is to uncover how far-right political speech constructs, mobilizes, and sustains anti-LGBTQ meaning and affect. Semiotic phenomenology has been used in communication, cultural studies, and intercultural scholarship to explore how signs emerge in experience, how they are interpreted, and how power and identity are embedded in them (Martinez, 2006).

Linguistic data includes the collection of representative speeches (public speeches, debates, official statements) made by far-right political officials or candidates from 2016 onward that explicitly address or contain anti-LGBTQ content. Selection criteria require that the speaker must be publicly identified as far-right (based on political views, ideology, or affiliation), and the speech must be accessible (transcript or audio/video). The use of purposive sampling to ensure a variety of contexts (electoral campaigns, legislative debates, rallies, media appearances), geographical diversity if relevant, and different speech formats (formal, informal, prepared, ad lib). Selected speech acts are presented in a political context, and the framing and choice of terminology overtly denigrates LGBTQ+ individuals or groups. The approach here is the examination of a cultural process as it relates to human communication (Lanigan, 2013).

Purposive public statements were sampled where LGBTQ+ people and/or issues was the subject of the speech act. Sample involved far right characterizations within the context of political speech. Statements had to originate with an elected public official, political candidate, or their political appointee. Four stages of analysis were utilized:

- 1- Bracketing: Focus first on what is given in the speech: signs, tropes, tone, affect
- 2- Description of signs and signifiers: Identify key signs (words and metaphors), significant linguistic features (naming, pronouns, deictics), symbolic elements, intertextual references. Record how these are presented, in what context
- 3- Reduction: Move from description to detecting essential structures: what patterns recur, what affective or identity positionalities are evoked (self/other, purity/contamination, threat/defense, etc.). Isolate "meaning units" (informed by Merleau-Ponty, 2004)

- 4- Interpretation of the signified: Relate the essential structures of meaning to the broader semiotic and political field: How far-right politics frame LGBTQ identities. Consider power relations, audience, ideological frameworks

Framing LGBTQ+ Citizens as “Groomer”

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term “grooming” is a late 18th century word that describes “the action of feeding, currying, and generally tending a horse or horses;” but quickly evolved to also include “the action, practice, or fact of brushing, combing, and cleaning the coat of a horse” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). Over time, “grooming” became generally associated with the analogous meaning of brushing/coming and cleaning, which could be applied broadly to humans as much as other animals, beginning in the late 19th century (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). This modest transition of taking care of an animal or self represents an organic semantic shift into an analogous application. However, for political purposes, the meaning gets stretched even further.

Beginning in the 1970, Christian religious leaders in the United States began a social movement, labeled as the “Moral Majority” campaigned on their opposition to LGBTQ+ civil rights (Palma, 2022, para 5). With the deep incorporation of evangelical religious views within the core of Republican political ideology, beginning in the late 1970s, solidified and normalized the characterization of LGBTQ+ citizens as amoral. This semiotic strategy here frames LGBTQ people as predators of children. This amoral political ideology was eventually codified in law and policy, such as the ban on gay citizens serving in the military.

Though this issue was softened slightly by the 1990s, the Clinton administration took only a small step forward with their “don’t ask, don’t tell policy,” which lasted from 1993-2011. However, this policy only served to prevent the military from asking recruits and service people about their sexual preferences, only to dishonorably discharge them if their preferences happened to come to light. This anti-LGBTQ policy resulted in approximately 14,000 service members being involuntarily separated from the military (Kegu, 2023, para 2). Though the ban on homosexual service members officially ended in September of 2011, opposition to the LGBTQ community has continued with restored vigor as of 2016. As of May 2025, Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth, a Donald Trump appointee, issued a memo that orders the military to remove transgender troops from military service by early June if they do not leave voluntarily because being transgender harms national security (Timotija, 2025). Secretary Hegseth’s memo conflates gender dysphoria as harmful to national security and military readiness.

Labeling LGBTQ+ citizens as “groomers” is a harmful and discriminatory slur that aims to further marginalize an already marginalized group. This reframed term has

gained traction in certain media circles, right-wing politics, and online communities, perpetuating harmful stereotypes, and contributing to the stigmatization of LGBTQ+ individuals, as demonstrated above by official state of Florida communications. One example of this discrimination can be observed in certain segments of the online community, where conspiracy theories and false narratives are propagated. These communities falsely associate LGBTQ+ individuals with the term “groomer,” suggesting that they are engaged in the inappropriate and predatory behavior of grooming children. Such narratives lack a factual basis and are designed to spread fear and hatred. Waltman (2015) argues that right-wing groups employ a concept known as the homology of exclusion. The homology of exclusion is defined by:

- 1) the assertion of superiority of the ‘worthy’ people
- 2) and stigmatizes those who fail to subscribe to the ideas of the worthy, therefore are a threat to cherished values
- 3) so that the worthy may imagine a world where inferior people and ideas do not exist (Waltman, 2015)

In the realm of politics, some politicians have utilized this harmful rhetoric for their own gain. For instance, in 2021, a U.S. congressional candidate, Marjorie Taylor Greene, faced backlash for repeatedly using the term “groomer” when referring to LGBTQ+ individuals. This usage was widely condemned as inflammatory and offensive, reinforcing stereotypes that are not only untrue but also dangerous to the LGBTQ+ community. In November of 2022, Marjory Taylor Greene (R-Georgia) tweeted her response to a gay politician, who was discussing the violence directed at the LGBTQ+ community following a shooting at a gay nightclub in Colorado, with the “groomer” slur (Thalen, 2022).

“Pass my Protect Children’s Innocence Act to stop communist groomers like this from using state government power to take children away from their parents to allow a for-profit medical industry to chop off these confused children’s genitals before they are even old enough to vote” (Green, 2022).

Certain political organizations and religious groups have also been known to employ this rhetoric in their campaigns or messaging. They use it as a means to vilify LGBTQ+ citizens and further their own agendas. Such actions not only perpetuate discrimination but also hinder efforts to promote equality and inclusivity.

Another strategic political example of the use of the “groomer” slur occurred when a Michigan state senator, Lana Theis emailed her fellow Michigan senator, Noa McMorrow, a Democrat, accusing her of “grooming children” and trying to “sexualize kindergarteners” regarding her support of LGBTQ+ civil rights (Block,

2022, para 1 & 4). In June of 2022, Pastor Mark Burns, who was endorsed by then former President Donald Trump for South Carolina's 4th Congressional District, used the "groomer" slur, along with many others, on the Stew Peters Show (Padgett, 2022, para 1-2). During this interview, Burns committed to voting in favor of a proposed law to punish parents and teachers for supporting LGBTQ+ youth equality and acceptance by labeling them "groomers" and they should be punished for "abusing young children" (Padgett, 2022, para 4). Burns went on to argue that parents and teachers discussing LGBTQ+ issues with children are a "national security threat," which amounts to "treason" (Padgett, 2022, para 5-6 & 8). Burns' hate speech and derision of LGBTQ+ citizens has been realized in Secretary Pete Hegseth's official Department of Defense anti-transgender policy.

The framing of LGBTQ+ citizens as "groomers" is a discriminatory slur with no basis in reality. It is employed in some media, by politicians, public figures, and political organizations to marginalize and harm already vulnerable groups. Combating such harmful rhetoric is essential for fostering a more inclusive and accepting society, where all individuals can live free from prejudice and discrimination.

Framing LGBTQ+ Citizens as "Mentally Ill"

Though free speech is essential to a functional and free democratic society, words and symbols are not harmless. Speech, whether an utterance or written, is intended to convey meaning, intention, and sentiment of the speaker/writer. Speech may be used to express one's support, opposition, fear, hate, or a myriad of other views. Hate speech itself is constructed in such a way, using specific words or phrases, intending to be harmful to the depiction of those that speech targets. Hate speech may also fall under the category of "propaganda," as it is often both a personal view and a strategic political message. According to Tsesis (2002) hate speech aids in defining the in-group and the out-group that intends to represent the out-group as the "embodiment of evil". The semiotic strategy here is to medicalize and frame queerness as an illness or disorder. "Hate propagandists gather public support for their discriminatory and violent entreaties by evoking broadly accepted vilifications" (Tsesis, 2002). Such medicalized vilification may lead to the continued use of dehumanizing language and symbols, which may allow for the normalization of violence against these out-groups. It is important to note here that in 1973 the American Psychological Association removed "homosexuality" from the DSM listing as a mental illness after reviewing more empirical research, ending organized medicine's social stigmatization of homosexuality (Drescher, 2015; Moran, 2013).

The normalization of discrimination and violence may be substantially amplified if they stem from political

candidates, appointed, or elected officials who speak from a position of authority, which implies a permissive environment. Vivek Ramaswamy, a businessman turned Republican candidate for U.S. President in 2023-2024, stated during the second Republican Primary debate in 2023, "Transgenderism, especially in kids, is a mental health disorder..." (Ring, 2023, para 6). This comment does not imply or present any equivocation. Ramaswamy directly states that being transgender is a "mental health disorder." Therefore, framed to be outside accepted norms of society.

Iowa State Representative, Jeff Shipley made multiple statements on the floor of the Iowa legislature that transgender Iowans are "mentally ill" (Rushing, 2022). To provide some cover for his comments, during the debate over education policy regarding transgender students, he stated, "When I say gender dysphoria is a mental illness, that's not me saying that. I'm referencing the 'Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition'" (Rushing, 2022, para 10). It is important to point out, the DSM-5 does not list gender dysphoria as a mental illness. The DSM-5 description of gender dysphoria in adults and children is largely descriptive and not designated as a mental illness (American Psychiatric Association, n.d.; Moran, 2013). However, this "mental illness" designation is not without its historical roots in the American Psychiatric Association. As late as 1973 the APA defined being gay as a mental illness (Dowd, 2021). In this period, Dowd points out that many characterized homosexuality as both deviant behavior and mental illness.

These derogatory characterizations symbolize a deviation from the norm, thereby labeling the behavior as abnormal. The act of labeling someone as mentally ill is a powerful linguistic sign. It creates a symbolic representation that associates LGBTQ+ identity with a supposed mental disorder. The use of language in this context serves as a code that communicates specific meanings. Mental illness, historically stigmatized, carries negative connotations and serves as a tool for marginalization. The semiotic process of labeling creates an "us versus them" dynamic. LGBTQ+ individuals are marked as different and are positioned as outsiders by being labeled as mentally ill, thus contributing to their social marginalization.

Analysis and Findings

In order to analyze the symbolic nature of speech, the researcher must be organized, methodical, and systematic. Every writing and utterance, in order to be fully and properly comprehended by the receiver, must be structured in a manner that lends itself to that comprehension, what we call grammar and syntax. We must be able to discern what the speaker meant and what the listener understands, as per the Peircean Triadic Model

(Moradi et al., 2022; Van den Hoven, 2010). In both empirical and interpretive analysis, working from a structured process of investigation creates a reproducible analysis, even though the results may be subjective. When analyzing text or utterance, some analytical questions emerge that allow the researcher to understand the full intended meaning of the sign being offered. Though much of the process of semiosis (the production of meaning) for the interpreter is almost automatic, in order to critically analyze what meaning is conveyed, we must deconstruct the text or utterance.

- 1) What is the explicit definition of the target term, phrase, theme, or image
- 2) Does the explicit definition appear inconsistent with the contextual meaning, and are there alternative meanings or subtext at play
- 3) Which alternative creates a clearer meaning for the interpretation of the sign based on its contextual relationship with other signs
- 4) What interpretation makes the most sense

This systematized approach to analysis, deconstructing semiosis to understand the intended

meaning being conveyed, is not dissimilar to critical hermeneutics or logic. Much the way signs and signification create meaning and understanding within our social world, critical hermeneutics points to “the inconsistencies in our historical, social, and cultural universe (Roberge, 2011).

Table 1 provides a structural overview of the findings, which illustrates the semiotic distinction between the direct and symbolic meanings. The difference between direct and symbolic meaning lies in how language is used to convey reality versus how it is manipulated to serve political ends. In the direct sense, terms like “groomer” and “mentally ill” describe specific psychological or behavioral conditions grounded in clinical or social definitions. However, their symbolic or political meanings are distorted as it is filtered through right-wing rhetoric to overtly suggest that LGBTQ+ individuals are predatory, dangerous, or psychologically unstable. This shift from literal to symbolic meaning transforms descriptive language into a tool of propaganda, weaponizing words to provoke fear, justify discrimination, and construct LGBTQ+ identity as a social and moral threat to legitimize discriminatory.

Table 1: Direct Meaning vs Symbolic Meaning

Term/Slur	Direct Meaning	Symbolic Meaning
Groomer	“[G]rooming is a preparatory process in which a perpetrator gradually gains a person’s or organization’s trust with the intent to be sexually abusive. The victim is usually a child, teen, or vulnerable adult”	Equating being in the LGBTQ+ community with sexualizing children and indoctrinating them into LGBTQ+ agenda. Being gay or transgender is the same as being a pedophile.
Mentally Ill	“Mental illnesses are health conditions involving changes in emotion, thinking or behavior (or a combination of these)” (American Psychiatric Association, n.d., para 1).	Suggesting that LGBTQ people are abnormal and mentally unfit.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has investigated the complicated realm of hate speech, specifically focusing on the semiotics involved in the derogatory framing of the LGBTQ+ community as “groomer” and “mentally ill.” Through the lens of semiotic phenomenology, it becomes evident that these expressions are not mere linguistic constructs, but powerful symbols strategically employed as part of a political narrative that constructs negative perceptions. By understanding hate speech as a form of propaganda, we can appreciate the deliberate manipulation of signs and symbols to perpetuate harmful stereotypes and marginalize a vulnerable community.

The linguistic nuances, and negative framing, embedded in the terms “groomer” and “mentally ill” are not only derogatory but also contribute to the perpetuation of stigmatization against the LGBTQ+ population. These

expressions not only serve to label and dehumanize individuals within the community but also play a role in shaping public perception, thereby influencing policy, legislation, and societal attitudes.

In the broader context, the struggle for LGBTQ+ equality emerges as the primary civil rights movement of the twenty-first century. As society evolves, so too must our understanding of the semiotic dimensions of hate speech to effectively combat discrimination. Future semiotic studies, with a focus on the frequency and quantity of the use of such slurs, may prove instrumental in highlighting the persistent challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community and in advocating for comprehensive legislative measures that promote inclusivity and protect against discrimination.

As we move forward, it is imperative for scholars, activists, and policymakers to remain vigilant in decoding

the semiotic elements of hate speech, recognizing its role as a tool of oppression, and actively working towards dismantling such harmful narratives. Only through a concerted effort to understand and counteract these insidious symbols can we hope to foster a society that embraces diversity, equality, and respect for all individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Funding Information

The authors have no support or funding to report.

Ethics

This is the author's original work.

Conflicts of Interest

The author(s) acknowledge there are no conflicts of interest, nor financial support of this work.

No human subjects were involved in this research.

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