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Every few months, as a new holiday rolls around, the “theme” of stores and town/city centres changes to reflect what’s around the corner. This is perhaps most noticeable now, when multiple holidays collide to create the *holiday season*.

While some people may grumble at the onslaught of Santa figures, Christmas carols, and menorahs, other people sigh with satisfaction at the returned presence of their beloved Christmas trees, red and green or blue and white, and bright lights strung everywhere. For those who are happy to again see these festivities, why does the returned presence of these items bring about happy feelings? It all comes down to the power of symbols.

Symbols carry meaning. When we encounter symbols around us, and try to make sense of them, we are engaging with the “linguistic landscape”. This isn’t just about words, though. Meaning is carried in images, sounds, colours, displays, and so forth. When we encounter a symbol, our minds go through a quick-fire process of interpreting the symbol by connecting it with similar things that we have experienced in the past.



Happy holidays

Language Matters

If we encounter a chair, then we might also be expecting to see a table nearby, and we might begin to feel somewhat relaxed because our minds are telling us there is something present that is connected with sitting and resting. Likewise, when we see red and green together, our minds connect to ideas of Christmas, because that colour combination appears very regularly and with high frequency as Christmas nears. Then, depending upon your prior

experiences with Christmas, this might bring about thoughts of family and feelings of happiness, or even thoughts of busy stores and feelings of frustration. Certain colours, images, sounds, etc. can bring up a variety of feelings, depending on what our mental dictionaries are connecting with.

When we see holiday symbols in large numbers, those putting up the symbols are counting on more people having happy connections than not. This includes stores and restaurants hoping to get your business, city/town centres hoping to bring more people out, and

individuals hoping to raise their own spirits as well as those of passersby.

While most people no longer remember why, historically, lights are strung on houses at the start of the holiday season, or where the idea of Santa Claus came from, they still display these items and others because of their own past experiences connected to these symbols, usually reaching back to childhood (thought of as simpler times).

Symbols are powerful. You might have noticed that Christmas and Hanukkah symbols appear earlier during particularly difficult years. This year there was news coverage and commentary around the early appearance of lights, trees, menorahs, stockings by the fireplace, etc., and not just in commercial spaces either.

This commentary was also coming from around the world, not just one location. With a difficult year coming to an end, people have been eager to connect with happy feelings and to the holiday season, which also happens to signal the end of the year approaching.

So even though October and November are not quite the end of the year, holiday decorations were reached for by many this year, and have remained a beacon of light for happier times to come.

No matter what symbols you reach for, the Language Matters team wishes you and yours a happy holiday season!

Corinne Seals has expertise in language use in society, multilingual language learning, and the language of criminal investigations.

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Shameless CEOs: Are they worth it?

Almost 50 years ago, the American philosopher John Rawls published a celebrated account of what fairness looks like in a liberal democracy. Though scrupulous in its safeguarding of individual freedoms, *A Theory of Justice* incorporated an important rider. Rawls’ so-called “difference principle” stipulated that resulting inequalities were justified only if they benefited the least well-off in society.

It is doubtful Rawls would have judged the pay of Tim Steiner, chief executive of online grocery delivery company Ocado, to fall into this

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category. A report by the High Pay Centre thinktank revealed that Mr Steiner last year earned £58.7m, 2605 times the average wage of one of his employees, which stands at £22,500.

The centre’s analysis reveals the biggest pay gaps in the British economy are in retail, where the CEO/employee ratio is 140:1. But they reflect more broadly an explosion in executive pay over recent decades. In the UK’s 100 biggest stock market-listed companies, chief executives pocket 73 times the

amount paid to workers on average. Forty years ago, the ratio was 18:1. The details of Mr Steiner’s pay were disclosed on the same day it emerged that 800,000 people have lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic. As the working poor resort to foodbanks in ever larger numbers, Unicef has launched an emergency response in Britain and will channel over £700,000 to food-insecure households across the country.

This gulf between the top and bottom of our society is immoral. The notion of regulating the pay ratio between CEOs and employees has been mooted in the past. It urgently needs to be revisited.