



# PUT DOWN THAT THESAURUS – AN OPEN CALL TO QUALITATIVE RESEARCHERS

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There are growing calls that qualitative researchers, in fact anyone who writes, should stop right now with this new practice of using a "thesaurus" as a writing aid. I, along with hundreds of highly experienced colleagues oppose this practice. Heres' why:

- The fundamental skill of any qualitative researcher is *putting things into words*. Formulating the right questions. Finding new language and repurposing old language. Moving the linguistic window. Hitting the nail on the head. Turning to a thesaurus is abandoning all that and abrogating all of that responsibility. It is turning an essentially human endeavour into something essentially inhuman, by relying on an inanimate tool. We declare that only humans make and share meaning. A thesaurus can never "get" the deep context which is necessary to produce just the right turn of phrase at the right point on the page. A thesaurus has no desires, no history, and does not participate in our shared life-world.
- On top of that, a thesaurus embodies a very specific worldview, yet this worldview is never made explicit. One thesaurus gives "high-class" as a synonym for "fashionable". But is it? Who gets to decide? These books are full of pernicious stereotypes which we perpetuate by using them. We are sure that most researchers will welcome our declaration that they themselves are not capable of monitoring and regulating their use of these tools in a sufficiently critical way.
- Also, thesauri are notoriously often just *wrong* about similes. *We* know a simile is only a simile, but we are sure that most researchers will again welcome our declaration that they themselves won't realise this. (We can't check about how right these books are because we would never own or use such a book, let alone learn how to use it properly, but we have this information from a reliable anecdote.)
- Most of these kinds of books are published by massive publishing houses, many of which are linked to media empires which dictate and distort public and political opinion globally. To use such a book, in fact more or less any book, automatically makes you deeply complicit in maintaining these empires.
- Just about all the other trades and professions have seen their livelihoods eaten into by automation, and we thought we were spared. Twenty-plus years in education and now this. It is terrifying that many of our most valuable hand-made products are going to be rendered worthless by a tsunami of cheap imitations.

Beyond our call to stamp out this practice, we demand that journal editors thoroughly screen manuscripts for use of thesauri and their even more pernicious cousins, dictionaries.

(Next: some super cool prompts for ChatGPT which can definitely detect thesaurus and dictionary use, 100%.)