

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

**WHAT'S IN A NAME:
INDEXICALITY, LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES AND POLITICAL POLARIZATION AT
THE INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF ANCIENT CULTURES**

By

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Introduction

Within the last decade, there has been an abundance of scholarly and academic attention paid towards rising political polarization in the United States and across the world in countries like India, Poland, Colombia, Britain, and Brazil (Carothers and O’Donohue, 2019). While there is no shortage of research on this topic when it comes to highly divisive subjects like immigration, women’s rights or the 2016 election, there is little theorized on the increasing phenomenon of name changes across the United States and the ways this phenomenon displays evidence of growing political cleavages within the American political sphere.

This research contributes to the discussion of the removal and changing of offensive place names by specifically focusing on the name change of the “Oriental Institute” to the “Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures” (or ISAC for short) at the University of Chicago in April of 2023. In discussing this change, administration and curators cite the geographic limitations of the term as one of the major factors for the name change. While this may seem like an isolated circumstance, this particular instantiation is situated within the broader conversation of name changes taking place in the United States – as evidenced by moves across the Southern United States to remove and change the names of former Confederate leaders from schools, streets, and other public institutions.

This paper will demonstrate the ways name changes can display political polarization through a linguistic anthropological approach specifically through the theoretical foundations of indexicality, language ideologies and axis of differentiation. Index, one of three signs developed by Charles Peirce is understood as anything that focuses the attention (Peirce 1940, 109). Gray clouds can be an index of incoming rain. This research will rely on the theoretical foundations of indexicality in two ways. The first will be to see what the term “oriental” means to users and

non-users of the word. Secondly, this research will bring to light what the use or the use or non-use of the term “oriental” indexes for participants *about* the people who use or do not use the term. Both are dependent on respective individual’s language ideologies and the axes of differentiation they invoke. Language ideologies inform index as it works to highlight supposed differences among linguistic practices and use this as justification and rationalization for creating iconic representations of users, “typical” persons, and activities (Gal and Irvine 1995, 972). Axis of differentiation is an aspect of language ideologies in which moral and political characteristics of people are created, identifying self and others in opposition.

Principally, this research asks, how does the use of indexicality and language ideologies regarding the term “oriental” and the *use* of the term “oriental” showcase political polarization?

This paper will introduce the prevalence of name changes across the United States, situating this study within the pre-existing national discourse and pre-established literature on the subject. Given the center of this study as centered on the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures, this research will also supply readers with a brief history of the institution and the broader role of museums historically, as a center of knowledge creation and formation. This is followed by a presentation of different theoretical tools and concepts utilized in this research.

The first section of analysis will discuss the two forms of indexicality, first and second order, corresponding to what students and admin think the term “oriental” points to and what usage of the term says about the people who use or do not use the term. This is followed by linguistic ideologies and axes of differentiation – cementing difference between both groups. The last section of this research will be a conclusion in which the larger themes and importance of this research will be reiterated.

While the name change of the “Oriental Institute” to the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures became official in April of 2023, this sign outside the museum’s walls (image 1) showcases the lasting remnants and legacy of the former name. Although there have been deliberate efforts to reconcile with the offensive connotation of the term “oriental,” it has become a permanent mark on the institution.



Image 1: Sign outside the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures

Name Changes and Political Polarization

Much of the research on political polarization within the United States centers around the 2016 Presidential election and the ways in which polarization was mediated by the spread of misinformation on social media (particularly Facebook and Twitter, now X) as well as more conventional news media outlets (Kubin and von Sikorski 2021, 192). These respective studies tend to focus on the distinction between ideological polarization and affective polarization (Kubin and von Sikorski 2021, 190). Ideological polarization can be defined as the distinction between political opinions, attitudes, and stances of individuals on opposing ends of the political

spectrum (Dalton 1987, 978). Affective polarization is instead more focused on how salient aspects of one's identity can contribute to animosity, dislike, or distrust between disparate ideologically affiliated groups (Mason 2018, 2).

While political polarization can manifestly be seen in conversations around “the wall”, immigration, women's rights and the infamous, “lock her up” chants, little attention has been paid to the way seemingly innocuous language such as “Oriental Institute” and ways in which the name change can index a political affiliation and more broadly, showcase ideological polarization (Bekafigo et al 2019, 1172). When looking at the ways in which opposition and supporters and of the name change view one another, the political tension becomes palpable.

The 2023 name change of the Oriental Institute (or more recently, OI) to the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures, ISAC for short, spurred considerable discussion on the University of Chicago's Campus. Students, professors, and patrons of the museum could all be heard remarking on the recent name change, and such conversations are hardly isolated to the University of Chicago. In recent years there has been intense global debate around changing the names of streets, Universities, museums, and other such public and private institutions (Weissman, 2021).

In 2022, the Turn the Tide Committee (TTC) – alumni from the Thomas Nelson Community College – released a petition calling on Governor Glen Youngkin to stop the name change of their former college and let the citizens of Virginia decide the new name. Nelson was a former political figure in Virginia known for his work as Governor following Thomas Jefferson. More recently, his legacy was called into question as he was a prominent slave owner that promoted racist policies like school segregation and thus, the name of the community college became the site of adamant disagreement (Weissman, 2022).

Similarly, an online petition to rename “Robert E. Lee High School” in Midland, Texas garnered over 10,000 signatures with some retaliating that the removing the name “Lee” from the high school felt like “reverse racism” towards the white student body despite Lee’s controversial position as General of the Confederate army during the Civil War (Borden, 2020).

Name changes have also occurred at prominent universities across the United States. In 2015, students with the Black Justice League at Princeton University called for the removal of Woodrow Wilson’s name from their public-policy program. While president of Princeton University (1902 – 1910) Wilson discouraged the enrollment of African American students and later, as President of the United States (1913 – 1921), supported segregation of white and Black employees within the federal government (Viglione and Subbaraman, 2020). Princeton is not alone in thinking through their problematic legacy. In June of 2020, the University of Southern California removed Rufus Von KleinSmid’s name from campus buildings due to his support of eugenic practices in the twentieth century (Viglione and Subbaraman, 2020).

Ongoing efforts to remove derogatory slurs from place names has evoked similar political discussion. In 2022, the U.S. Department of the Interior worked to remove “the word “squaw” from nearly 650 place names on federal land” (Groom, 2022). Relatedly, in 2015 H.R. 4238 was enacted which worked to modernize terms relating to minorities which included removing “negro,” “oriental,” and “Eskimo” from federal laws in the United States (U.S. Congress. House of Representatives HR 4238, 2016).

This map (image 2) from the U.S. Geological Survey displays the nearly 650 geographic features that removed the term “squaw” from their place name - showing the prevalence of name changes, more broadly across the United States. This is not including the number of schools, museums and other institutions that have changed their name.

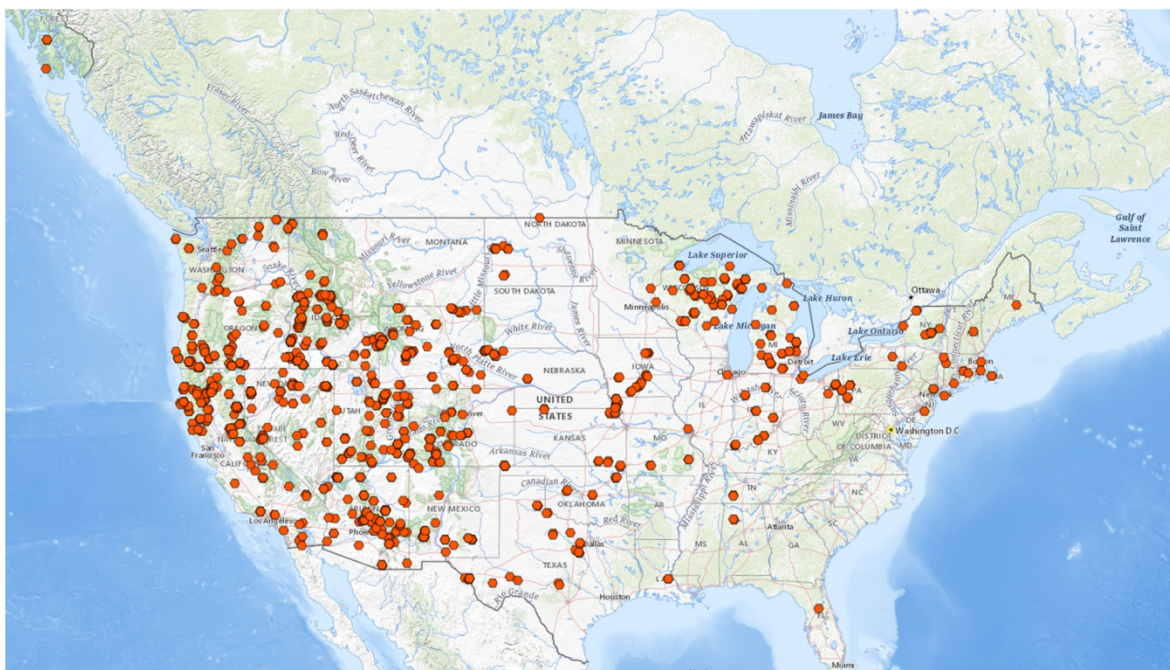


Image 2: Map showing the sites where “squaw” has been removed from public place names

This social justice-minded work has extended to museums as well. In 2020, Harvard University changed the name of their “Semitic Museum” to the “Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East” after calls that the previous name did not “reflect the geographical area from which the museum’s collections come” (Riskin-Kutz, 2020). In the same year, the American Society for Oriental Research changed their name to American Society for Overseas Research after acknowledging the racist overtones of the term “oriental” (Herbert, 2020).

Given the recent steps in changing the names of schools, streets, and other public institutions away from former Confederate leader’s names, there is a plethora of literature on the symbolic importance of such an act. Scholars like Alderman from East Carolina University discusses how name changes can “rewrite the landscape of southern identity” specifically for the African American population living in the South who even post-Civil War were confronted with oppressive Jim Crow laws and the reminders of an oppressive, not so distant past (Alderman 2000, 1). Incorporation of the name Martin Luther King Jr. or MLK on avenues, streets and

boulevards of urban city centers is a significant aspect of public memorialization that incorporate “a vision of the past into the spatial practices of everyday life” that challenges prominent, Civil War era narratives of the events of the past (Alderman 2000, 1).

Building on this, Berg and Vuolteenaho find that name changes can be used for commemorative purposes while also communicating “official representations of the ruling socio-political order” producing an “official” version of history incorporated into everyday urban experiences, frequently working to legitimize, or delegitimize particular perspectives (Berg and Vuolteenaho 2009, 10).

While there is no disputing the importance of name changes for symbolic, cultural, and political reasons, the literature on this subject more broadly fails to recognize *how* these name changes and the subsequent disputes around them serve as a site in which growing political polarization is especially salient. This research will merge scholarship on political polarization and apply it to the growing phenomenon of name changes across the United States and museum studies.

Historic Role of Museums and the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures

While the majority of name changes in the United States have centered on schools and streets, museums are an equally important site of contestation. The importance of a name change within a museum context lies in a museum’s historical functionality, both politically, culturally, and socially.

The history of museums in many ways coincides with the history of orientalism as it was frequently a place to reinforce “otherizing” narratives. Public museums as we know them today first appeared in the late seventeenth century – coinciding with both the Enlightenment era and growing colonial and imperial efforts across the globe. At their simplest form, museums are

intended to find, name, collect, conserve, categorize, and conduct research (Alexander 2013, 9-13).

Elements such as the way objects are lit, framed and the sub text that accompanies objects works to convey meaning to patrons (Moser 2010, 23). While this may not seem inherently worth interrogating, early museums such as The British Museum and the Louvre were very much national, colonial institutions (Collins 2020, 235). The objects displayed and how they were displayed were intended to define cultures and create particular types of knowledge about them from a western perspective (Collins 2020, 237). More recent museum discourse has centered around the notion that museum displays “do not simply transmit knowledge” but actual create it and have a large role in our societal understanding of science, culture, and history as well as gender, race, and sex (Collins 2020, 232).

Early national museums and many contemporary museums to this day work twofold to construct identity of “other” and assert their national esteem, “glories procured by looting gifts, and acquisitions-- all testaments to the military prowess, cultural taste, and financial resources” (Wright 1996, 9).

The circumstances that laid the foundation for national and imperial museums are unfortunately no different than for the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures. In 1895 the department of Semitic Languages and Literatures was founded by University of Chicago by President William Rainey Harper (Teeter 2017, 62). This department included not only Harper, but his brother, a leading Assyriologist as well as famed Egyptologist James Henry Breasted. Together the three decided on the need for “manuscripts, casts, and ideally authentic antiquities to supplement their teachings” which came to include replicas of the Rosetta Stone, the Moabite Stone, and the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser (Teeter 2017, 62).

After a trip to Egypt in the early twentieth century, Breasted brought back over 700 items including “animal mummies, fragments of statues, shabtis, jewelry, stone and pottery vessels, and five human mummies” which were to be housed in the basement of Walker Museum (Teeter 2017, 62). The first items to be accessioned by the museum occurred in 1896, with the support of British archaeological groups, bringing thousands of objects to Chicago. Due to the rapid increase of objects, these items soon became housed in an early rendition of the museum, called the Haskell Oriental Museum (Teeter 2017, 62).

In the early nineteenth century, the term “oriental” was used as a geographic descriptor to define anything broadly “east” or “eastern” as opposed to “occidental” or “western” (Vorderstrasse 2023, 1). In the mid twentieth century the usage of this term and its status as an academic and literary tradition became heavily critiqued by Edward Said. During the 1900’s, when ISAC’s early renditions of the museum were formed, “oriental” was still a highly respected form of scholarship, and the term frequently used.

It was in 1904 that the University funded its first expedition via the University of Chicago Oriental Exploration Fund, to Bismaya, Iraq, followed shortly thereafter by digs in Nubia and Egypt (ISAC “History of ISAC,” n.d.). To this day, many of the nearly 350,000 objects in ISAC’s possession came from expeditions in West Asia and North Africa during the 1920s, 30s and 40s.

Many of the objects acquired during the 1920s to 40s from Anatolia, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, and Palestine were acquired under the terms of partage (Kersel 2022, 126). Partage is practice where “archaeologically rich nations, foreign excavators, and sometimes landowners split the excavated artifacts at the end of a field season” (Kersel 2015, 48). This system has come under intense scrutiny as it often seen as a colonial concept where “occupying nations took advantage

of archaeologically rich nations, emptying them of their cultural heritage and providing little or nothing in return” (Kersel 2015, 48). While not an inherent instantiation of colonialism, the terms of partage relied on colonial era power relations that allowed the OI to gain access to such precious material culture (Kersel 2022, 323).

It was not until 2019 – the centennial year of the museum, that staff and curators began addressing the problematic origins of the museum and their collection. This took form in their gallery renovations where ISAC made attempts to acknowledge “the depredations of looting and the destruction of sites and objects, and the impact of modern technologies on archaeological and epigraphic research” (Kersel 2022, 323).

It wasn’t until two years later in March of 2021 that the University formed a committee that began discussing the eventual name change of the museum from the “Oriental Institute.” In the early stages of reconsidering the name, the ISAC updated their website with the following message,

The Oriental Institute is currently undergoing the process of addressing issues surrounding our name, we are taking actions that will ultimately result in the renaming of the institution. As this process unfolds, we will continue to refer to our institution under the abbreviation, The OI (ISAC “About,” n.d.).

The two main considerations, according to the museum’s administration, had to do with the “general associating of the word “Oriental” with the Far East and its negative connotation” (van den Hout 2023, 2). The committee, “one of the broadest the OI had ever seen” was chaired by associate professor Hervé Reculeau, with thirteen representatives from various fields of study including the OI, Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, and Center for Middle Eastern Studies as well as numerous PhD students. This committee discussed the many outcomes of a

possible name change, considering things like the legal, financial, technological repercussions (van den Hout 2023, 2).

The new name and logo were officially instated in April of 2023.

While The Institute for The Study of Ancient Cultures is not a national museum, they are not immune to the colonial legacy of archaeology and its subsequent pitfalls. Given the museum's role as creating a knowledge base about ancient civilizations from a western perspective, rooted in a hierarchical relationship, the name changes of museums in particular signal an attempted reconciliation with this checkered past and carries immense gravity given the broader role of museums.

Methodology

While there is no disputing the importance of name changes for symbolic, cultural, and political reasons, the literature on this subject fails to recognize *how* these name changes and disputes come about, and how these tensions grow. In order to investigate this more closely in the case of the name change of the Oriental Institute to the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures, my study relied on multiple sources: interviews conducted in person with students, YouTube videos from the official ISAC channel, Reddit threads associated with the University of Chicago, and news articles and podcasts produced by students on the University of Chicago campus.

Given the gravity of the name change on the University of Chicago campus, many of the interlocutors I ended up interviewing were chosen because of their preestablished interest in the topic. When discussing my research, they willingly chimed in, as it was something they had been thinking about given the recency of the transition from the "Oriental Institute" to "The Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures." All of the three individuals were graduate students at the

University of Chicago ranging in age from 21 – 26 and come from a variety of ethnic, cultural, socio-economic, and gender identity backgrounds.

In prompting discussions about the name change, I began simply by asking “how familiar are you with the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures Museum on Campus?” While all of my interlocutors were familiar with the institution, few had visited or even stepped foot inside the building. Gauging their responses and their different levels of familiarity with the museum allowed me to give a bit of background on the museum, their collections, educational mission, and introduce the name change - which all of the participants were familiar with. From here I asked things like “what was your impression of the name change?” “What does oriental mean to you?” “What does that term conjure up?” and “do you think a name change is enough?” Given that many of the students were already interested in the internal politics around the name change as well as institutional responses, many brought the topic up on their own with little input from me as interviewer. From there, I coded their responses into an emerging variety of themes including general reactions to the name change, what the term oriental means to them, types of persons they believe use the term, what they (as students) think ISAC is trying to accomplish and what larger steps can ISAC make.

Wanting evidence from a broader public, I located a subreddit that specifically discusses the name change. Due to the nature of Reddit, I was able to see conflicting ideologies in conversation with one another – people for the name change and people against the name change were already engaging with one another providing an online, anonymous focus group of sorts. While I was unable to prompt questions, given the inactivity of the thread, I found that many were already discussing questions I had asked my interlocutors, providing useful insight into how people beyond the University think of this transition.

While I made multiple attempts to speak with individuals who work at the museum, it was difficult to pin anyone down for an official interview. Due to these challenges, I drew a lot of information from ISAC's official website, including their YouTube channel which included videos discussing the name change, press releases, and interviews conducted by student journalists via another independent newspaper at the University, *The Chicago Maroon*. In transcribing videos and digging for explanations as to what spurred the name change, I immediately found the same themes emerging, although frequently with conflicting messages to what students had reported. The general disconnect between students and administration on why the name change was necessary, what the term oriental means and what ISAC was trying to do by changing their name became an interesting subject of analysis.

Additionally, I incorporated analysis of several articles and a podcast episode from the "Chicago Thinker," a conservative and libertarian student run newspaper at the University of Chicago. While many of the interlocutors and individuals on reddit supported the name change on the basis that the term "oriental" is outdated, rooted in colonial and imperial power conceptions of the world, and othering, the views represented by *The Chicago Thinker* were staunchly anti-name change and only thought it would be appropriate because of the "confusing" nature of the term geographically. This gave me a foray into the different ideologies around the term oriental, specifically the use and non-use of the term. This began to reveal the political cleavages between those who use the term "oriental" and those who oppose.

Given the archival nature of much of the data in conjunction with interviews, this enabled me to pull a large swatch of diverging opinions and viewpoints on the name change – displaying the ways individuals at the same institution can feel contempt for their fellow peers who have alternate opinions. As I will argue and show, this maps more broadly on to contemporary

discourse surrounding the increasing political polarization within the United States, this being a prime example on a smaller scale.

Data Analysis 1: What Does “Oriental” Index

Indexicality is one of three signs at the root of semiotics, developed largely by Charles Peirce. Indices, like icons and symbols all have a unique relationship to objects. When drawing on examples of indexes, Peirce says,

I see a man with a rolling gait. This is a probable indication that he is a sailor... A weathercock indicates the direction of the wind. A sundial or a clock indicates the time of day... A rap on the door is an indication (Peirce 1940,109).

Michael Silverstein contributes to this established literature by discussing the importance of index in identity formation. Silverstein speaks to the ways in which certain qualities of speech (ex. gruffness of voice), word choice, etc. may be used to “point to” a broader identity of a particular person (Silverstein 2014, 485).

The theoretical grounding of indexicality can already be seen in student interview responses. When asked their thoughts on the term “oriental,” in context of the Oriental Institute students seem to agree that to them, “oriental” has always been a term assigned to *people*, specifically from East Asia. Students also overwhelmingly cite the *historical roots* of the term and its ties with colonialist and imperialist expansion also stating that the term is highly *outdated* and *offensive*. Throughout the interviews, the students agree that not only does the term “oriental” refer to a different geographical region than the artifacts and material culture shown at ISAC but has long been used as a derogatory and offensive term directed towards people of east Asian descent.

Student A (26-year-old master's student, of East Asian descent) remarks that, "I've always heard of that oriental referenced in terms of east Asians and like Asians... *people* that are perceived as east or south Asian." A similar sentiment is mirrored with Student B (22-year-old master's student, of East Asian descent) who adds that "Yeah, oriental in my head is east Asian." This understanding is rooted in her own personal relationship with the word and being "called an oriental before..." Student C (26-year-old master's student, white) remarks that the term to her:

has a connotation of like China, and like more um, like what you would think of as like China, and maybe like Japan, Vietnam, like that area as opposed to the "fertile crescent" area.

Student A speaks to this notion of "oriental" referencing people but also discussing the ways in which the term "means like 'the other' at least in terms of western frames of understanding." Student A remarked throughout our interview that,

I feel like when I hear oriental, I literally think of being othered...Like I keep saying this, but it really feels like othering, just to have like a museum be like just specifically for this and then also have that name...

Aside from it being a term designated for *people* both students discuss the highly problematic and derogatory overtones of the term. Student A states,

I feel like the word oriental has some really negative connotations especially for like Asian people and as someone who is east Asian, I don't generally love to hear things labeled as oriental.

Student B shares,

Because you would think that like nobody says oriental anymore um, just to describe things in general and it's become sort of a problematic term to like describe people first, but also objects from a certain region...

Here, student B is also speaking to the outdated nature of the term and the ways in which it has fallen out of popular usage. Student C shares a similar sentiment stating that the term “oriental” calls to mind

Something that you would use in the eighteen hundreds to say like “the orient,” like “we’re traveling to the orient” or something like that. Yeah, so not something that you really hear being used today.

Additionally, student C discusses the “negative historical connotations because of the colonial use of the term.”

Despite the museum’s initial use of the term “oriental” as a geographic descriptor, Student B admits that,

I didn’t realize that it could’ve meant something different in the past, so yeah. I think for me even still, the weight of that word is so significant because it has, it’s like, so problematic and also like refers to a part of my identity, um that I don’t think I could ever like see a different definition of oriental, uh despite the original or initial etymology. And obviously like the semantics of what oriental means differs within the contexts of which you’re talking about it. But I’ve always thought of it like, as a significant marker of identity.

For all of the students, the term “oriental” is impossible to separate from its historical, problematic origins and inherently othering nature, despite what the ISAC may have initially intended when choosing the name.

To combat these prevalent assumptions, the ISAC museum circumvents the notion of “oriental” being a racist term by laying out a different perspective of what *they* believe the term indexes, along with its shortcomings. In a video published on the ISAC’s official YouTube channel, professors and curators alike discuss the name change. One professor of landscape archaeology, Mehrnoush Soroush, comments that the name change:

...will help us establish two facts about us. It denotes the proximate geographical location of where our research has been carried out and another aspect is that our institute has good prestige for a mutually respectful engagement with the countries in which the research is being carried out [emphasis added]" (The Institute for the Study of Ancient Culture 2023, 2:13).

Instead of focusing on the problematic origins of the word, and the contemporary usage, ISAC officials instead lean into geographic specificity – which students cited as an issue as well.

Comments like these from ISAC representatives are plentiful. In an interview with The Chicago Maroon, Michael Whelton, the Communications Director for the museum asserts that the name change did not come about because of the colonial legacy of the term but because,

The word oriental doesn't [reflect] our collections or our work. When people hear the word oriental, they think of East Asia, and our work doesn't address East Asia at all. A big part of this was to combat this confusion (Rodriguez, 2023).

This message is echoed throughout UChicago news, ISAC press releases, and videos from both the University and ISAC's official YouTube pages. Across these platforms there is the continuous assertion that the name change is to, "better reflect the geographic focus of its research and scholarship," with the acknowledgement, albeit limited, that "the usage and meaning of the word "oriental" has changed over time" (The Institute for the Study of Ancient Culture 2023, 1:15)

While students all acknowledge that the "oriental" to them references East Asia more specifically, they are more focused on the need for a name change due to the disparaging nature of the term – something scarcely mentioned by the University. While both students and admin tend to agree on what the term "oriental" points to in a referential sense (east), they disagree about what the use of the term and name change says *about* the museum more broadly as an othering institution opposed to one that conducts mutually beneficial research.

What “Oriental” indexes to Students	What “Oriental” indexes to ISAC
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Refers to <i>people</i> from <u>a specific region</u> (East Asia) - Negative connotation - Problematic - Outdated - Othering - Rooted in colonial legacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not as geographically accurate as it could be - Doesn’t fully encompass the mutually respectful engagement where research is being carried out - Confusing to patrons

Table 1: Student’s and ISAC Administrator's characterization of the term "oriental"

Despite ISAC’s relatively clear and repeated messages that the name change is due to patron confusion and the changing meaning of the word, students read ISAC’s decision to change the name as a surface level way to address broader issues within the University.

Student A remarks, “if it’s just the name change then like, and it’s the same exact place, them that’s all just like for a façade and appearances.” Student B points to the irony of the name change given the current political climate on campus stating,

I think that’s great but also, it’s pretty ironic that the University of Chicago... seemingly cares about that stuff when a lot of the student body knows where their money goes. And we have this whole UChicago divest movement, especially with like the protests about Palestine that are happening on campus like, where students are like giving the university demands and asking them to like verbally asking them to divest from violent Israeli forces, really in the context in the state of our world, what good [does the name change do] ...? And I know that there’s only so much that museums as an institution can do, but it is funny just thinking about like the university’s priorities in lieu of seemingly what they’re trying to do with the museum.

Here Student B discussing how the public name change of The Oriental Institute to the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures is a way to distract or diffuse other tensions between students and administration. Student B goes on to say,

We'll do this, like philanthropic donation to this like, whatever [to distract]. I think it definitely distracts from greater problems and I think for profit universities tend to, even though they don't claim to be for-profit, they tend to follow a similar pattern in that, they'll do one small thing and then not really address the greater wrongs.

While not mentioned explicitly, students here are referring to the phenomenon of virtue signaling. This term, coined in 2015 by British journalist James Bartholomew in an article for *The Spectator* is defined as the “act of engaging in public discourse in order to enhance or preserve one’s moral reputation” (Westra 2021, 1). Instead of just implemented a name change, students challenge the museum to change many of its institutional practices when it comes to the collection and display of objects. Student A states,

I think that they just need to reframe how they're thinking about things. This isn't really like gonna change anything, but they probably could've hired some consultants and how to make it actually be like a positive place for students and not make it be like an inherently othering like institution, they also need to do some like... Repatriation, have general conversations, and maybe they are doing that, but changing the name doesn't do anything like, I mean it does but it doesn't.

In addition to making the space feel more accessible to students from a wide variety of backgrounds, Student C discusses more “decolonizing” efforts from the museum including repatriation and financial compensation.

I mean I guess I don't know what the museum beyond just changing the name and I think that museums in general like if they have artifacts that do not belong to like the United States, like it's in Chicago, like if they have artifacts not from the US or something, there have to be like some like, I don't know what you would call it, retribution is not the right

word, like reparations, or some kind of like, give back to the community that they have taken these artifacts from. Like I know that now for museums like this is kinda of a new thing in the last few decades of like this idea of giving back to those communities so I mean the artifacts are already there so returning them is one option but, I think most institutions wouldn't do that so like, some kind of like compensation for the fact that they took them, something more tangible than just like changing the name could be necessary or more equitable I guess.

While the term “oriental” to both students and admin is seen as a geographical referent, the *use* of the term “oriental” indexes different things for the students and for the administration of the museum. The students think it is merely surface and does not address real change. This tension extends more broadly to other decisions the University has made regarding investments, and their political stance on more recent events, creating an us vs. them mentality felt primarily by the students. In many ways, discussions about the name change served as a foray into broader ideological differences and displayed the growing animosity between students and administration leading to political polarization informed by their respective language ideologies.

Instead, students think that the University should make more of an effort for the ISAC museum to be a positive environment for students while broadening the discussion about their history and ties with colonialism. To students, this should result in material compensation both financially and via repatriation.

Orientalism and The Orient

While to both students and administration, the term “orient” is used as a reference point, broadly speaking of the east they have different understandings of the connotation of the term and what it implies.

Administration and students cite early notions of “oriental” rooted in 314 CE “when the Romans reorganized the provinces of West Asia and North Africa as the Diocese of Oriens (Diocesis Orientis)” Oriens meaning east, or east of Rome (Vorderstrasse 2023, 1) and the notion that “orient” is simply a geographic referent.

While the original use of the term was a geographic descriptor, it later became linked to a well-respected scholarship in the western world throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries – when the Oriental Museum was established. At its inception the field of orientalism was intended primarily to uncover ancient languages of the middle east and uncover the origins of civilization (Daneshgar 2020, 177). This is in line with the work done by ISAC as they received one of the earliest casts of the Rosetta Stone.

Since then, the term has come to carry complex and nuanced baggage in its relation to colonialism, imperialism, and anti-immigrant sentiment.

Students on the other hand, are in line with the usage of “oriental” and “orientalism” as defined by the seminal work by Edward Said. To both Said and the students, orientalism is the academic, literary, artistic, and political practice of analyzing, describing, settling, and ruling over land that was once designated as “the orient” (Said 1978, 3). This tradition is rooted in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century colonization and imperial efforts in which orientalism became a tool to dominate, restructure and assert authority over the Orient (Said 1978, 3). Orientalism and the subsequent narrative, images, and ideas of “the orient” (or the east, as it was originally designated) and its people were a European invention not only to define the orient but create a contrasting image of Europe (Said 1978, 1 & 2). Where people from the East are seen as exotic, weak, and feminine, European and Westerners are seen as strong and masculine (Said 1978, 1).

Gérôme's *The Snake Charmer* (image 3) completed in 1870 is one of the most poignant and well-known representations of orientalism seen in art perpetuating the false narrative that “the orient” is underdeveloped, mythical place in need of being colonized. This rhetoric and line of thinking also represented in political thought and ideologies of the time as informed by early orientalists studying the middle east in the early nineteenth century.

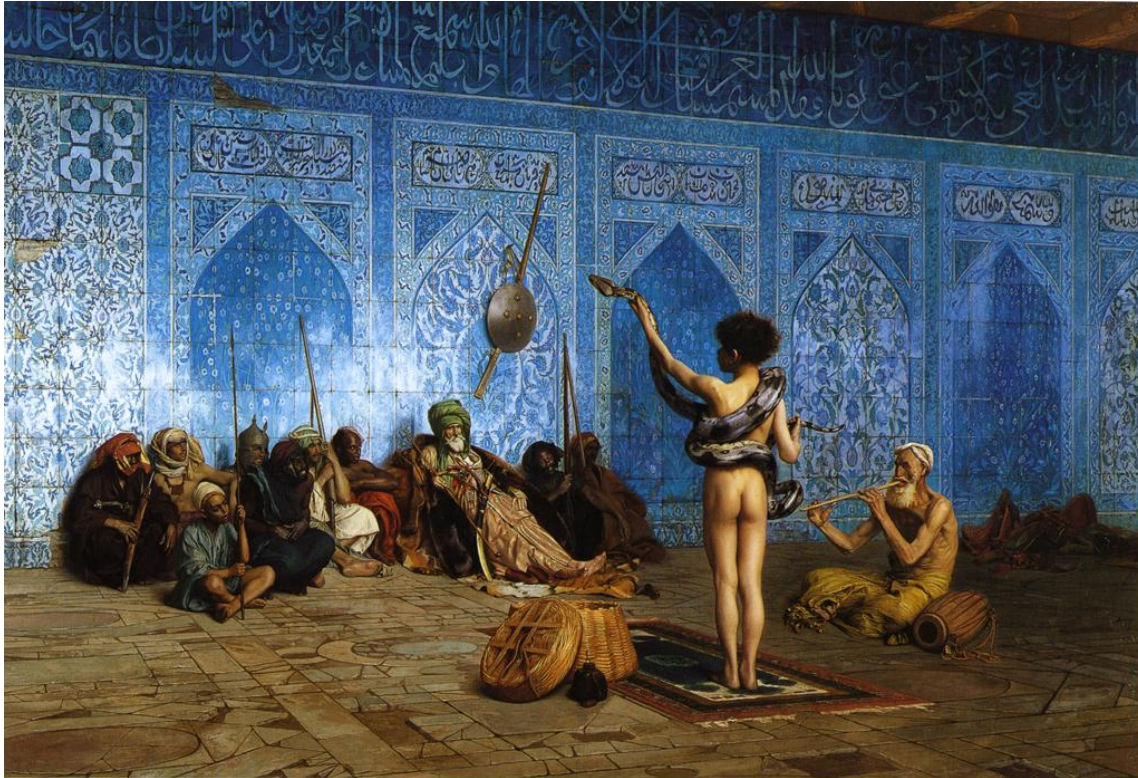


Image 3: Jean-Léon Gérôme: *The Snake Charmer*, 1870

It wasn't until the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that the term began to reference individuals with Asian origins after the wave of migration that occurred on the West Coast in the mid 1850's (Vorderstrasse 2023, 2).

While the term “oriental” has vastly fallen out of fashion with in the twenty first century, there has still been a reinforcement of these stereotypes (as mentioned by Said) in new mediums via, museums, television, film, and other popular culture mediums (Said 1978, 26). Despite the demise of the word, term “oriental” still carries immense baggage from its colonial and imperial

legacy that students center in thinking about the term in its application today and the way the museum serves as a site of “orientalizing” the “other.”

The graph below – from Google’s Ngram Viewer, showcases the trends in the usage of the term “oriental” in books documents, and other textual sources starting in 1800. Since the 1930’s the term has drastically decreased in usage, with the highest points coinciding with the establishment of the scholarly field of orientalism as well as colonial and imperial ventures in the 1800’s.

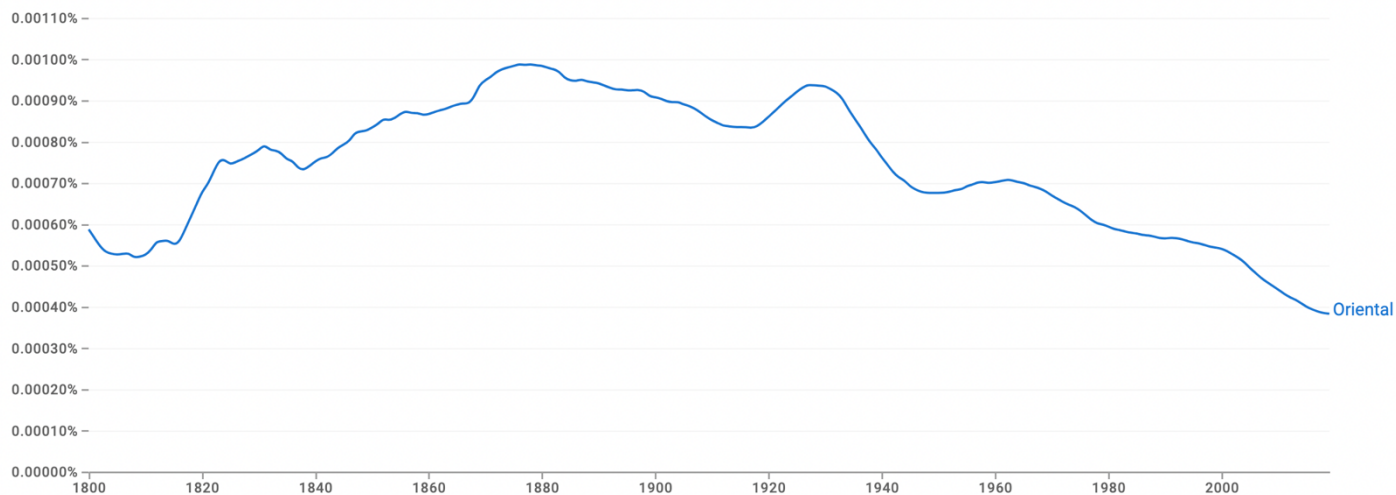


Image 4: Results from Google Ngram Viewer showing usage of term oriental from 1800

Data Analysis 2: What kind of people/institutions use the term "oriental"?

While students cite racial sensitivity as a key contributing factor in the name change, admin look at the geographic shortcomings of the term. For students, individuals that use the term “oriental” are cast as “geriatric,” “problematic,” “white,” “racist,” and “male” establishing and cementing a difference between those that do use the term and those that do not based on these characteristics.

Some of the most important work on language ideologies comes from Susan Gal and Judith Irvine in their article “The Boundaries of Language and Disciplines: How Ideologies Construct Difference.” To Gal and Irvine, language ideologies work to highlight supposed differences among linguistic practices and use this as justification and rationalization for creating iconic representations of users, “typical” persons, and activities (Gal and Irvine 1995, 972). While it is now commonplace that social categories like nationality, race, gender, and class are constructed through symbolic devices, language is frequently overlooked as a center for this kind of categorization (Gal and Irvine 1995, 969). For Gal and Irvine, focusing on linguistic difference as a site of identity formation works to not only define the self, but do so as opposed to an imagined “other” (Gal and Irvine 1995, 975). Because these differences are rooted in language, it is believed that cultural differences are natural, inherent and “deriving from those persons’ essences, rather than from historical accident” (Gal and Irvine 1995, 975).

The theorization of language ideology responds to early philologists’ attempts to cement differences in language and further notions of inclusion and exclusion (Errington 2001, 31). In their seminal article *Language Ideology* Woolard and Schieffelin assert that “some of the most provocative recent work on linguistic ideology... comes from studies of colonialism” (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994, 67). In this introductory article on language ideology, Woolard and Schieffelin provide a broad survey of the work that has been done in this subject, in the instance of my own research, I will see how language ideologies contribute instead to political polarization.

One of the most prominent examples of language ideologies around the term “oriental” can be seen in a subreddit thread located within the R/UChicago group. The R/UChicago group is a public forum on Reddit for alums, current and prospective students and others interested in

the University. In this forum, people ask questions related to past application prompts, graduation requirements, clubs, and course registration. One specific subreddit thread discusses the name change of the Oriental Institute to The Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures. The thread is titled “Oriental Institute changes name to The Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures, West Asia & North Africa” which is linked to an article by the same name from UChicago News.

Many of the comments on this page attempt to make light of the name change by applying humor to the topic. The top liked post on this page reads, with intended irony, “This name really rolls off the tongue” (buycurious900, April 2023). Many of the other comments on the page mirror this sentiment. While most people think that the name change was a good idea, there is much disdain for the new name.

I understand the need for a name change, but it seems a bit long and awkward. At least OI is an easy acronym. What about this new name? Is it ISACWANA? ISAC, WANA? ISAC of WANA? (Pieces-of-Everything, 2023).

While not a direct comment on the name, user Judge-Nahar uses this platform to discuss how the name change of the “Oriental Institute” represents a broader cultural shift for the University of Chicago.

Remember when the University of Chicago back in the 60s was one of the few Universities that didn't immediately cave in to bullshit from the students who thought they knew more than the professors...? [emphasis added] (Judge-Nahar, 2023).

The underlined font represents the typified person Judge-Nahar is calling to mind about students at the University of Chicago who promoted the name change. By suggesting that the name change of the Oriental Institute is “bullshit from students” Judge-Nahar is suggesting that students are entitled, thinking they know more than professors. Additionally, this comment

effectively works to glamorize a past notion of the University whose reputation was undisputed as one of the top institutions in the nation. Judge-Nahar works to establish differences with temporal deixis (Levinson 1983, 54). By positing this characteristic of the University as Chicago as strong “back” in the day, he is indexing that in the present, things are different.

User Judge-Nahar's comment about University of Chicago in the 60s ushered in a plethora of responses, one from user Al_Jazzar states,

Calm down. The discussions that led to the name change included many high-level scholars from the regions that ISAC studies. Most similar institutions in the US and Europe have been dropping "Oriental" from their name. It is just archaic and useless. It wasn't "bullshit from the students who thought they knew more than the professors." It was mostly the professors that led the charge. The book has pretty much been closed on the phrase "Oriental" since Edward Said killed it in the 70s. Only racist old geriatrics still call themselves "Orientalists" in the field [emphasis added] (Al_Jazzar, 2023).

In this case, the use of the word “oriental” to user Al_Jazzar creates a mental image of an elderly individual, not willing to change with the times and who has antiquated beliefs about race in the United States. Similarly, another user replied, “Oh right. 1960s America was perfect model for how society should function and treat people of color” (DirectorTraditional6, 2023) and “ikr [I know right] wish we could go back to the 60s” (tacopower69, 2023). These two comments employ sarcasm to dispel the notion that the 60’s was an idyllic era that we should work towards achieving once again. In addition to sarcasm, these two responses seem to be paralleling the “Make America Great Again” rhetoric to point to the absurdity of such a claim that University of Chicago and more broadly, the United States, were at their height of justice and freedom in the 60s.

In another thread titled “The Oriental Institute is changing its name” user Al_Jazzar remarks that

I know some people that work there. In short, they have been fighting prominent geriatric donors about changing the name for quite a long time. I won't go into the long argument about the term "oriental", but at the end of the day it just isn't a very accurate or useful term (Al_Jazzar, 2023).

Here, Al_Jazzar is reasserting the notion that those that want to keep the old name are “geriatric” and unwilling to progress with the times.

Even in these brief responses to Judge-Nahar's post, one can already see the ways in which Al_Jazzar is creating a mental image of a typical person that might use the term “oriental” in everyday life. Thusly, usage of the word “oriental” becomes ubiquitous with a “geriatric,” “racist” individual in this instance.

Like the post from Al_Jazzar, students overwhelmingly agree that individuals who use the term oriental are more often than not, elderly. Student A remarks that to them, those that use the term “oriental” provokes the image of a “problematic, white, racist” person.

Mostly like older people who just aren't very well educated in terms of like how those words might harm others or they're used as like, they're weaponized, it really depends on the person. But generally, just someone who isn't really well aware...

Student B relays that

The only people that I've witnessed use the term oriental in the more of the like problematic like, um, derogatory way would be older people, and older white people. Or I would also say like older Americas (sic), it's not really like, I mean the term is racial, but the usage of the term is very much western. I'm not familiar with like other parts of the world that have the same, attach the same meaning to the word.

For two students, usage of the term oriental called to mind particular professions. Student A discusses the link between anthropology and the term oriental saying

Reminds me of like an old anthropologist, like an old, white, male anthropologist, like professor that you like have, and like everyone knows is problematic, but he's tenured so he can't be fired, and everyone thinks he's racist. And he just needs to retire, like that's the vibe I get from people that use like oriental or like problematic like white women, like Karen vibes, but I feel like I've mostly heard of it like in an academia sort of sense, like older people who just like aren't very up to date on language.

Student C adds,

If I were to hear someone use to the term oriental, like what I would picture is like, some like, British explorer you know? Like um, with like the khakis and the little bucket hat type thing, that's what I would picture or just like, if someone were to use the term now, I would image it's like an old person that's using it.

Typified person who uses the term oriental – from the perspective of students and reddit users	Typified person who does NOT use the term oriental – as defined by what users of the term are seen as
- Geriatric →	- Young
- Problematic →	- Value political correctness
- White →	- Racially diverse
o “Karen” White Women	
- Racist →	- Anti-racist
- Male / Patriarchal →	- Range of gender identities
- British explorer; think colonial and imperial era →	- Attempting to correct and critically engage with the field of anthropology
o Anthropologists	
- Professors →	- Students and learners

Table 2: How students and reddit users perceive of individuals that use the term oriental, and how they view themselves in comparison

The comments from students and Reddit users effectively works to cements difference between those that use the term oriental and those that do not. This creates a co-constitutive relationship between the two groups of people – the characteristics that define users of the term

“oriental” are in staunch opposition to the characteristics of those that do not. While users of the term might be old and white and problematic, students pride themselves on being up with current political correctness, many of whom are people of color, and consider themselves to be anti-racist and are in fields that critically analyze the legacy of colonialism and imperialism. By defining themselves and other in opposition, the political cleavages become more definite.

Another place where identity indexing is evident comes from the *Chicago Thinker*: *Outthink the Mob*, a conservative, libertarian online newspaper run by students at the University of Chicago. The article “Historical Incineration Lives On: UChicago’s Oriental Institute to Change Its Century-Old Name” published by the Thinker’s publisher and editor-in-chief, Declan Hurley, discusses the name change of the “Oriental Institute” shortly after the change became official.

This article begins with the discussion of the “collegiate cancel mob” at Princeton University where students worked to remove the name of Woodrow Wilson from the university’s public policy school in 2020. Hurley continues by stating that this “historical incineration” has reached the University of Chicago with the name change of the Oriental Institute (Hurley, 2023). Despite The Institute being over one hundred years old and not being destroyed, Hurley makes claims that, “nothing is permanent amid the West’s iconoclastic fervor [emphasis added]” (Hurley, 2023).

The notion that a highly cherished institution is near destruction is continued throughout the piece as Hurley states that, “Sadly, the ivory tower deems destructive intellectual laziness to be far preferable to the hard work of critically presenting the past [emphasis added].” In these few lines alone, Hurley’s use of language is calling on an image of a radical, destructive, lazy

“intellectual,” incapable of critical thought – aligning those characteristics with individuals who supported the name change (Hurley, 2023).

This image contrasts with the views he is representing and more broadly representative of the Chicago Thinker, that of the level-headed conservative individual with a keen eye to protecting the past and the cherished institutions.

This sentiment is continued in a podcast produced by the Chicago Thinker in which two staff writers (Jack Moore and Arthur Long) discuss The Oriental Institute’s name change. Broadly, the two discuss their issue with the name change being rooted in an act of political correctness.

Who is the arbiter of what is derogatory or not? And when we’re calling things derogatory left, right and center there are inevitably going to be things that are certainly not derogatory and now, we’re erasing them from history like mentioned with Princeton and [John C.] Calhoun. (The Chicago Thinker 2023, 16:38)

Here, the two students promote the idea that name changes have gotten out of hand – and that those who label things derogatory are nonsensical and erratic, ultimately leading to the eradication of history. Later, they add

It’s important for people to know what the term oriental means and how it was used in history, not run away from it, and say oh, ‘it’s derogatory, it’s offensive’, and run away... (The Chicago Thinker 2023, 12:52).

In the accompanying YouTube recording of the podcast, both staff writers can be seen flailing their hands in the air enacting the role of those who deem oriental to be offensive, furthering the idea that they are erratic but also overly sensitive.

In summarizing the importance of this topic on a broader scale, the students conclude that name changes represent a

... a push from the left across institutions, government, this is how they think of America now, it's inherently racist or derogatory or evil so this is just right out of the 2023 leftist playbook, it's sad that it's here at The University of Chicago which should be the bastion of defending against this kind of woke push... (The Chicago Thinker Official 2023, 18:45).

This is the first explicit instance in which support for the name change has been linked to a political ideology, although all other comments suggest as much. Like with the other examples, the way that the Chicago Thinker views themselves is largely informed not by their own beliefs, but by directly contrasting the beliefs of those that support the name change. As with the students, the two respective groups come to be defined by what the other is and is not, emphasizing their differences.

How The Chicago Thinker views those that support the name change	How The Chicago Thinker views themselves
- Erratic →	- Consistent
- Overly eager to label things derogatory →	- Thoughtful in deliberation
- Complicit in historical erasure ○ Iconoclastic, destructive →	- Attempting to conserve history
- Thinks America is inherently racist, derogatory, and evil →	- Views America as a bastion for freedom
- Have an agenda (leftist playbook) ○ Woke push →	- Unmotivated by larger political agenda
- Intellectually lazy →	- Nuanced and critical engagement with the past

Table 3: Shows how *The Chicago Thinker* views individuals that support the name change, and how they think of themselves in comparison

Axes of differentiation as discussed by Susan Gal and Judith Irvine, consist of “large clusters of paired, contrasting qualities that make two contrasting multidimensional images” and is an important aspect of language ideologies (Gal and Irvine 2019, 118). In this case, the axis of differentiation between these two groups is established by use of the term “oriental” in the museum and the mental images that are mapped on to those that use the word (resistant against the name change) and those that do not (support the name change). The contrasting qualities of these two groups is “ideologically defined as what the other is not” and “the images constructed out of such clusters are stereotypes” (Gal and Irvine 2019, 118).

The reactions and evaluations of the name change at the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures is an instance of how language ideologies – and within that, axes of differentiation operate. These ideological underpinnings mediate people’s reactions and motivation for the name change.

These language varieties (in this case, use of the term “oriental”) create social distinctions centered around age, ethnicity, and political affiliation. Because this distinction is political, and thus ideologically rooted, the aspects of one’s identity become increasingly salient in each groups respective distain for one another.

Anti-name change – views of themselves	Pro name change
- Protecting American history and legacy →	- Complicit in erasure of American history
- See America’s legacy positively and have pride →	- View America as inherently negative
- Concerned with conservation and preservation →	- Want to deny history

Table 4: How anti-name changers view themselves and pro name changers (as defined by what anti-name changers are not)

Pro name change – views of themselves	Anti-name change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Concerned with “othering” and political correctness → - Want to have dialogue about legacies of colonialism and imperialism → - Reconcile effects of colonialism. → <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Financial compensation and repatriation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Does not care about political correctness and are therefore old, and have outdated ideas - Does not think these conversations are necessary - Denial of any wrongdoings in the past <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ No need for any reconciliation

Table 5: How pro name changers view themselves and anti-name changers (as defined by what pro name changers are not)

Although the individuals attend the same school or are affiliated with the University of Chicago in some way, there is an explicit divide in how they conceive of themselves and their counterpart. While this particular example is seen at the University of Chicago, its implications can be spread across the broader United States and globe.

Conclusion

This research has demonstrated the broader, national significance of name changes and the way it serves as a site for examining growing political polarization and increasing ideological tensions. While the name change of the Oriental Institute to the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures may seem like a single instantiation of this kind of discourse, name changes have been an increasing phenomenon within the United States.

The utilization of the theoretical insights provided by indexicality, language ideologies and axes of differentiation, has shed light on how seemingly innocuous word choices can reveal

deeper conflicts and schisms and how the use of the term can denote particular ideological leanings.

Language ideologies and the mental images created of users and non-users of the term “oriental” in reference to the name change of ISAC, inform what the term indexes to various individuals. While students and professors agree that “oriental” has historically been used to reference the east, there is disagreement on how what contemporary usage of the term says about individuals, their political beliefs, age, race, gender, and professional backgrounds. Axes of differentiation, an aspect of language ideologies showcase how difference becomes cemented, as individuals and groups solidify their identity in stark contrast to their counterparts – where tension becomes palpable.

Overall, this research underscores the importance of critically examining language use in an institutional setting – museums, public institutions, schools, streets - and the ways in which we can uncover political and ideological tensions within the University of Chicago campus and beyond while participating in conversations about the historical use of museums. This research is important as name changes gain popularity, underscoring their symbolic importance while also understanding it as a site where intense polarization manifests.

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