Doublespeak

By William Lutz

Language is a tool, one of many human tools. But language is arguably our most important tool, for with it we have developed society and built civilization. However, like any other tool, language can be abused, used not to build but to destroy, not to communicate but to confuse, not to clarify but to obscure, not to lead but mislead. Moreover, language is a unique tool used not simply to communicate but to apprehend and even give shape to reality. Edward Sapir, in his essay "The Status of Linguistics as a Science," writes:

> Language is a guide to 'social reality.'... it powerfully conditions all our thinking about social problems and processes. Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection....We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation. (162)

Benjamin Lee Whorf later extended Sapir's thesis to what became known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. In 1940 Whorf also argued that each language conveys to its users a ready-made world view. "Every language ...incorporates certain points of view and certain patterned resistances to widely divergent points of view" (212). Whorf adds:

> Language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade,...the world is presented in a kaleidoscope flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds—and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. (212-213)

Language thus reflects our perception of reality, which in turn influences and shapes our reactions to people, events, and ideas. Language is a kind of conceptual blueprint used to organize our thoughts. In this sense, language becomes the means by which we shape reality and the means by which we communicate our perceptions of reality to others. Language can easily distort perception and influence behavior and thus be a tool, or weapon, for achieving the greatest good or the greatest evil. Socrates and Aristotle understood well this power of language.

In his essay "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell writes that the "great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish squirting out ink." Orwell goes on to express his belief in "language as an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought." (4:137) "In our time," Orwell observes, "political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible....political language has to consist largely of euphemisms, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness." (4:136) "Political language...is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind." (4:139)

Orwell is reflecting here the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis on the relation of thought and language, but he is also raising the political implications of this hypothesis. If

William Lutz

language can be used to control minds, then those who control language can control minds and ultimately control society. Language is power; those who control language control the world. Power may come out of the barrel of a gun, but without the control of language there can be no real control of society.

Doublespeak is language which pretends to communicate but really does not. Doublespeak is language which does not extend thought but limits it.

Orwell's belief in the power of language to achieve and maintain political control is most clearly expressed in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The Party in Oceania understands the power of language, for it has based its control of society on the control of language. While the Thought Police, terror, and torture, preserve order, Newspeak prevents disorder, dissent, rebellion, and even independent thought. The thoughts, inspirations, the ideas that could lead to disorder are controlled, even eliminated, through the control of language. As Stephen Greenblatt observes,

> If language is abused, if words can have entirely contradictory meanings at the same time, if the language necessary to express political opposition is destroyed, if notions of objective truth and unchanging history are abandoned, then since thought is dependent on language, all unorthodox modes of thought can be made impossible, history can be altered to suit the needs of the moment, the individual can be reduced to an automaton incapable of thought or disloyalty. (114)

In such a world one must reject the evidence of one's eyes and ears, for the great sin, "the heresy of heresies was common sense." (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 69)

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, O'Brien, Winston Smith's torturer and guide to understanding the reality of life in Oceania, instructs Winston that

> reality is not external. Reality exists in the human mind, and nowhere else. Not in the individual mind, which can make mistakes, and in any case soon perishes; only in the mind of the Party, which is collective and immortal. Whatever the Party holds to be truth is truth. It is impossible to see reality except by looking through the eyes of the Party. (205)

And the only way to see reality properly is through the language of the Party. Language thus becomes the means of control in the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

The official language of the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is Newspeak, a language that "was designed not to extend but to *diminish* the range of thought." (247) The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the Party and its members, "but to make all other modes of thought impossible." (247) Newspeak is the medium used to express the mental process in

> the labyrinthine world of doublethink. To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them; to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it, to believe that democracy was impossible and that the Party was the guardian of democracy; to forget whatever it was necessary to forget, then to draw it back into memory again at the moment when it was needed, and then promptly to forget it again; and above all, to apply the same process to the process itself.... Even to understand the word 'doublethink' involved the use of doublethink. (32-33)

The word *doublespeak* combines the meanings of *newspeak* and *doublespeak*. Doublespeak is language which pretends to communicate but really does not. It is language which makes the bad seem good, something negative appear positive, something unpleasant appear attractive, or at least tolerable. It is language which avoids or shifts responsibility; language which is at variance with its real and its purported meaning; language which conceals or prevents thought. Doublespeak is language which does not extend thought but limits it.

How To Analyze Language for Doublespeak

In his essay "The Teacher-Heal-Thyself Myth," Hugh Rank has written that identifying doublespeak requires an analysis of language "in context with the whole situation" in which the language occurs: "who is saying what to whom, under what conditions and circumstances, with what intent and with what results." (219) According to Edward P. J. Corbett, this method of identifying doublespeak "encapsulates the whole art of rhetoric and provides a set of criteria to help us discriminate those uses of language that we should proscribe and those that we should encourage." (16-17) Applying this method of analysis to language will identify doublespeak in uses of language which might otherwise be legitimate or which might not even appear at first glance to be doublespeak.

The Euphemism

There are at least four kinds of doublespeak. The first kind of doublespeak is the euphemism, a word or phrase that is designed to avoid a harsh or distasteful reality. When a euphemism is used out of sensitivity for the feelings of someone or out of concern for a

social or cultural taboo it is not doublespeak. For example, we express grief that someone has *passed away* because we do not want to say to a grieving person, "I'm sorry your father is dead." The euphemism *passed away* functions here not just to protect the feelings of another person but also to communicate our concern over that person's feelings during a period of mourning.

However, when a euphemism is used to mislead or deceive it becomes doublespeak. For example, the U.S. State Department decided in 1984 that in its annual reports on the status of human rights in countries around the world it would no longer use the word *killing*. Instead, it will use the phrase *unlawful or arbitrary deprivation of life*. Thus the State Department avoids discussing the embarrassing situation of government-sanctioned killings in countries that are supported by the United States. This use of language constitutes doublespeak since it is designed to mislead, to cover up the unpleasant. Its real intent is at variance with its apparent intent. It is language designed to alter our perception of reality.

Jargon

A second kind of doublespeak is jargon, the specialized language of a trade, profession, or similar group. It is the specialized language of doctors, lawyers, engineers, educators, or car mechanics. Jargon can serve an important and useful function. Within a group, jargon allows members of the group to communicate with each other clearly, efficiently, and quickly. Indeed, it is a mark of membership in the group to be able to use and understand the group's jargon. For example, lawyers and tax accountants will speak of an "involuntary conversion" of property when discussing the loss or destruction of property through theft, accident, or condemnation. When used by lawyers in a legal situation such jargon is a legitimate use of language since all members of the group can be expected to understand the term.

However, when a member of the group uses jargon to communicate with a person outside the group, and uses it knowing that the nonmember does not understand such language, then there is doublespeak. For example, in 1978 a commercial airliner crashed on takeoff, killing three passengers, injuring twenty-one others, and destroying the airplane, a 727. The insured value of the airplane was greater than its book value, so the airline made a profit of $1.7 million on the destroyed airplane. But the airline had two problems: it did not want to talk about one of its airplanes crashing, and it had to account for $1.7 million when it issued its annual report to its stockholders. The airline solved these problems by inserting a footnote in its annual report which explained that this $1.7 million was due to "the involuntary conversion of a 727." The term "involuntary conversion" is a technical term in law; it is legal jargon. Airline officials could claim to have explained the crash of the airplane and the subsequent profit. However, since most stockholders in the company, and indeed most of the general public, are not familiar with legal jargon, the use of such jargon constitutes doublespeak.

Gobbledygook

A third kind of doublespeak is gobbledygook or bureaucratese. Basically, such doublespeak is simply a matter of piling on words, of overwhelming the audience with words, the bigger the better. For example, according to an editorial in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, when Alan Greenspan was chairman of the President's Council of Economic Advisors he made this statement when testifying before a Senate committee:

> It is a tricky problem to find the particular calibration in timing that would be appropriate to stem the acceleration in risk premiums created by falling incomes without prematurely aborting the decline in the inflation-generated risk premiums. (12-A)

...Thus the State Department avoids discussing the embarrassing situation of government-sanctioned killings in countries that are supported by the United States.

Did Alan Greenspan's audience really understand what he was saying? Did he believe his statement really explained anything? Perhaps there is some meaning beneath all those words, but it would take some time to search it out. This seems to be language which pretends to communicate but does not.

Inflated Language

The fourth kind of doublespeak is inflated language. Inflated language is language designed to make the ordinary seem extraordinary, the common, uncommon, to make everyday things seem impressive, to give an air of importance to people, situations, or things which would not normally be considered important, to make the simple seem complex. With this kind of language car mechanics become *automotive internists*, elevator operators become *members of the vertical transportation corps*, used cars become not just *pre-owned* but *experienced cars*, grocery store checkout clerks become *career associate scanning professionals*, and smelling something becomes *organoleptic analysis*.

A World of Doublespeak

We live in a world filled with doublespeak. We are asked to check our packages at the desk "for our convenience" when it's not for our convenience at all but for someone else's convenience. We see advertisements for "pre-owned" or "experienced" cars, not used cars, for "genuine imitation leather," "virgin vinyl," or "real counterfeit diamonds." Television offers not reruns but "encore telecasts." There are no slums or ghettos, just the "inner city" or "sub-standard housing" where the "disadvantaged" or "economically non-affluent" live. Non-profit organizations don't make a profit, they have "negative deficits" or experience "revenue excesses." In the world of doublespeak it's not dying but "terminal living."

In the world of business we find that executives "operate" in "timeframes" within the "context" of which a "task force" will serve as the proper "conduit" for all necessary "input" to "program a scenario" that, within acceptable "parameters," will "generate" the "maximum output" for a "print out" of "zero defect terminal objectives."

It is rare to read that the stock market *fell.* Rather, it *retreated, eased, made a technical adjustment,* a *technical correction,* perhaps *prices were off due to profit taking,* or *off in light trading,* or *lost ground.*

When it comes time to fire employees, business has produced more than enough doublespeak to deal with the unpleasant situation. Employees are, of course, never fired. They are *selected out, placed out, non-retained, released, dehired,* or *non-renewed.* A corporation will *eliminate the redundancies in the human resources area,* assign *candidates for derecruitment* to a *mobility pool, revitalize the department* by placing executives on *special assignment, enhance the efficiency of operations, streamline the field sales organization,* or *further rationalize marketing efforts.* The reality behind all this doublespeak is that companies are firing employees, but no one wants the stockholders, public, or competition to know that times are tough and people have to go.

It is rare to read that the stock market *fell.* Members of the financial community prefer to say that the stock market *retreated, eased, made a technical adjustment* or a *technical correction,* or perhaps that *prices were off due to profit taking,* or *off in light trading,* or *lost ground.* But the stock market never falls, not if stockbrokers have their say. As a side note, it is interesting to observe that the stock market never rises because of a *technical adjustment* or *correction,* nor does it ever *ease* upwards.

The business section of newspapers, business magazines, corporate reports, and executive speeches are filled with words and phrases such as *marginal rates of substitution, equilibrium price, getting off margin, distributional coalition, non-performing assets,* and *encompassing organizations.* Much of this is jargon or inflated language designed to make the simple seem complex, but there are other examples of business doublespeak that mislead, that are designed to avoid a harsh reality. What should we make of such expressions as *negative deficit* or *revenue excesses* for profit, *invest in* for buy, *price enhancement* or *price adjustment* for price increase, *shortfall* for a mistake in planning or *period of accelerated negative growth* or *negative economic growth* for recession?

Political Language

Political language is the language of public policy and power. Our direction as a nation is defined for us by our elected leaders through language. The corruption of the language of power and public policy, therefore, can lead to the corruption of our political system and our sense of national purpose. If our leaders do not speak clearly to us, then we, the people, from whom all power ultimately derives, cannot have the requisite knowledge and understanding upon which to make important decisions.

It takes some effort to determine that "advance downward adjustments" in the appropriations request is really a budget cut. Vietnam gave us "protective reaction strikes" (bombings), "resources control programs" (poisoning the vegetation and water supply), "preemptive counterattack" (first strike), and "termination with extreme prejudice" (killing a suspected spy without trial). Watergate gave us "misspeak" and "inoperative statement" for lie, "inappropriate actions" for illegal acts, and "miscertification" for fraud and conspiracy. The IranContra affair gave us "cleaning up the historical record" for falsifying official documents, "carefully crafted, nuanced" answers for lies, and testimony that is "fixed by omission" for false testimony. This is language which attacks the very purpose of language, communication between people. This is indeed language which, in Orwell's words, is "designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind."

1988 Doublespeak Quiz

_____ 1. Energy Documents	A. diet
_____ 2. fourth quarter equity retreat	B. space suit
_____ 3. initiate a career alternative enhancement program	C. airplane cockpit
_____ 4. home plaque removal instrument	D. used car
_____ 5. uncontrolled contact with the ground	E. medical malpractice
_____ 6. anti-gravity panties	F. cow, pigs, chickens
_____ 7. grain-consuming animal units	G. airplane crash
_____ 8. adjustment of a windfall, or temporary minimal adjustment	H. toothbrush
_____ 9. diagnostic misadventure of a high magnitude	I. lay off workers
_____ 10. nutritional avoidance therapy	J. girdle
_____ 11. Extravehicular Mobility Unit	K. tax increase
_____ 12. previously distinguished car	L. electric bill
_____ 13. environmental technician	M. stock market crash
_____ 14. practically perfect	N. janitor
_____ 15. non-decision-making form	O. unconscious
_____ 16. Missionized Crew Station	P. irregular, or seconds (on a piece of clothing)

Courtesy of **Quarterly Review of Doublespeak**
National Council of Teachers of English
1111 Kenyon Road
Urbana, IL 61801
(217) 328-3870

Identifying Doublespeak

Identifying doublespeak can at times be difficult. For example, on July 27, 1981, President Ronald Reagan said in a speech televised to the American public that "I will not stand by and see those of you who are dependent on Social Security deprived of the benefits you've worked so hard to earn. You will continue to receive your checks in the full amount due you." This speech had been billed as President Reagan's position on Social Security, a subject of much debate at the time. After the speech, public opinion polls revealed that the great majority of the public believed that President Reagan had affirmed his support for Social Security and that he would not support cuts in benefits. However, five days after the speech, on July 31, 1981, an article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* quoted White House communications director David Gergen as saying that President Reagan's words had been "carefully chosen." What President Reagan did mean, according to Gergen, was that he was reserving the right to decide who was "dependent" on those benefits, who had "earned" them, and who, therefore, was "due" them.

The subsequent remarks of David Gergen reveal the real intent of President Reagan as opposed to his apparent intent. Thus, Hugh Rank's criteria for analyzing language to determine whether it is doublespeak, when applied in light of David Gergen's remarks, reveal the doublespeak of President Reagan. Here is the gap between the speaker's real and declared aim.

In 1981 Secretary of State Alexander Haig was testifying before congressional committees about the murder of three American nuns and a Catholic lay worker in El Salvador. The four women had been raped and then shot at close range, and there was clear evidence that the crime had been committed by soldiers of the Salvadoran government. As reported by Anthony Lewis of *The New York Times*, Secretary Haig said to the House Foreign Affairs Committee:

> I'd like to suggest to you that some of the investigations would lead one to believe that perhaps the vehicle the nuns were riding in may have tried to run a roadblock, or may accidentally have been perceived to have been doing so, and there'd been an exchange of fire and then perhaps those who inflicted the casualties sought to cover it up. And this could have been at a very low level of both competence and motivation in the context of the issue itself. But the facts on this are not clear enough for anyone to draw a definitive conclusion (E 21).

The next day, before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Secretary Haig claimed that press reports

on his previous testimony were inaccurate. When Senator Claiborne Pell asked whether Secretary Haig was suggesting the possibility that "the nuns may have run through a roadblock," Secretary Haig replied, "You mean that they tried to violate . . . ? Not at all, no, not at all. My heavens! The dear nuns who raised me in my parochial schooling would forever isolate me from their affections and respect." When Senator Pell asked Secretary Haig, "Did you mean that the nuns were firing at the people, or what did 'an exchange of fire' mean?" Secretary Haig replied, "I haven't met any pistol-packing nuns in my day, Senator. What I meant was that if one fellow starts shooting, then the next thing you know they all panic." Thus did the Secretary of State of the United States explain official government policy on the murder of four American citizens in a foreign land.

Secretary Haig's testimony implies that the women were in some way responsible for their own fate. By using such vague wording as "would lead one to believe" and "may accidentally have been perceived to have been" he avoids any direct assertion. The use of the phrase "inflicted the casualties" not only avoids using the word "kill" but also implies that at the worst the killings were accidental or justifiable. The result of this testimony is that the Secretary of State has become an apologist for murder. This is indeed the kind of language Orwell said is used in defense of the indefensible; language designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable; language designed to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.

Doublespeak and Clear Thinking

These last examples of doublespeak should make it clear that doublespeak is not the product of careless language or sloppy thinking. Indeed, most doublespeak is the product of clear thinking and is language carefully designed and constructed to appear to communicate when in fact it doesn't. It is language designed not to lead but mislead. It is language designed to distort reality and corrupt the mind. It's not a tax increase but *revenue enhancement* or *tax base broadening*, so how can you complain about higher taxes? It's not acid rain; it's *poorly buffered precipitation*, so don't worry about all those dead trees. That isn't the Mafia in Atlantic City, New Jersey; those are just *members of a career-offender cartel*, so don't worry about the influence of organized crime in the city. The Supreme Court Justice wasn't addicted to the pain killing drug he was taking, the drug had simply *established an interrelationship with the body, such that if the drug is removed precipitously, there is a reaction*, so don't worry that his decisions might have been influenced by his drug addiction. It's not a Titan II nuclear-armed, intercontinental, ballistic missile with a warhead 630 times more powerful than the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima; it's just a *very large, potentially disruptive re-entry system*, so don't worry about the threat of nuclear destruction. It's not a neutron bomb but an *enhanced radiation device*, so don't worry about escalating the arms race. It's not an invasion but a *rescue mission*, or a *predawn vertical insertion*, so don't worry about any violations of United States or international law.

Doublespeak which calls bus drivers *urban transportation specialists*, bill collectors *portfolio administrators*, and doormen *access controllers* can be considered humorous and relatively harmless. However, doublespeak which calls civilian casualties in a nuclear war *collateral damage*, lies *inoperative statements* or *plausible deniability*, and missiles designed to kill millions of people *Peacekeepers* is language which attempts to make the bad seem good, the negative appear positive, something unpleasant appear attractive, and which seems to communicate but does not. Such language breeds suspicion, cynicism, distrust, and, ultimately, hostility.

I offer these categories of doublespeak as a way of thinking about, identifying, and analyzing doublespeak and not as a definitive definition of the term.

Works Cited

Corbett, Edward P. J. "Public Doublespeak. If I Speak with Forked Tongue." *English Journal* 65 4 (1976): 16-17.

Editorial. *Philadelphia Inquirer* 25 December 1974: 12-A.

Greenblatt, Stephen J. "Orwell as Satirist." *George Orwell: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Raymond Williams Englewood Cliffs, NJ Prentice-Hall, 1974. 106-118.

Hess, David "Reagan's Language on Benefits Confused, Angered Many" *Philadelphia Inquirer* 31 July 1981: 6-A

Lewis, Anthony "Showing His Colors," *The New York Times* 29 March 1981: E 21.

Orwell, George. *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*. Ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus 4 vols Berkeley, U of California P, 1976

Orwell, George. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. New York: New American Library, 1961.

Rank, Hugh "The Teacher-Heal-Thyself Myth." *Language and Public Policy*. Ed Hugh Rank. Urbana National Council of Teachers of English, 1974. 215-234.

Sapir, Edward. *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir*. Ed D. D Mandelbaum. Los Angeles: U of California P, 1949. 160-166.

Whorf, Benjamin Lee. *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf* Ed John B Carroll Cambridge MIT, 1956. 207-219