2.10: Double Speak

Such language described by Orwell is called doublespeak. It is explained by William Lutz, author of the book “Doublespeak”, as language which “makes the bad seem good, the negative appear positive, the unpleasant appear attractive or at least tolerable. It is language that conceals or prevents thought.”

Lutz identifies several kinds of doublespeak according to whether euphemisms are used to mislead or deceive about an ugly reality or embarrassing situation, or whether pretentious, inflated, obscure or esoteric jargon is used to give an air of prestige, profundity or authority to one’s speech or to hide any ugly realities or embarrassing matters.

Another kind of doublespeak, which Lutz mentions, is language which is clear and accurate but implies something which is false. For example, the expression “no cholesterol” can be found on the front of a potato chip package whose ingredients (clearly listed on the back of the package) include saturated fats (which are converted to cholesterol when eaten). Orwell and Lutz remind us that a critical thinker must be on guard against subtle abuses of language like: using euphemisms, jargon, and obscure language to deceive and mislead. The use of ambiguous language by an arguer can create three distinct problems for the critical thinker.

**Ambiguous language can cause confusion.** Advertisers use phrases like “New and Improved,” and “Faster Acting,” to purposely create ambiguity in their audiences. This allows individuals to independently interpret such phrases as the needs of the different audiences warrant. In the same way, ambiguity associated with language like “good time” or “a lot,” allow people to interpret things individually, and perhaps differently, from the way the sender of the message intended.

**Ambiguous language can lead to over-generalizing and stereotyping.** Thinking in ambiguous terms tends to lead to categorizing large groups of people, events, and things under one label. For instance, “Young drivers are all alike, inconsiderate and dangerous.” “Students don’t care about learning. They just care about getting a good grade.” The greater the ambiguity, the more likely one is to ignore individual differences and classify all members of the group as...
being the same.

**Ambiguous language can lead to bypassing.** Bypassing occurs when people unintentionally use the same word to mean different things or use different words to represent the same thing. Problems of bypassing are much more likely to occur when we use ambiguous language, because there is really no way of checking the accuracy of the term against the actual event it is being used to describe. For example, "I don't know why I got sick, I only had 'a little' to drink." To one person "a little" might be one drink, but to another person it may be a six-pack. This always reminds me of the student in my class who would ask me if they could leave class "a little early." After saying yes, I was surprised to see them leave after the class had been in session for only about 15 minutes. Their idea of "a little early" and mine were very different.

Providing greater language precision is generally considered an advantage in the argumentative environment. Greater precision provides a sense of better understanding about what a person means. Precise words work to avoid misunderstanding between sender and receiver. The best communicative stance is to say what you have to say by using as precise language as you can, taking into consideration: time, place, person and occasion.

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**Loaded Words: How Language Shapes the Gun Debate**

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Words do more than just describe the world. They literally define it.

They shape and frame it. "Most people don't understand this," says linguist George Lakoff of the University of California, Berkeley. "Most people think that words just refer to things in the world and that they're neutral. And that's just not true."

Lakoff has written many books about this idea. "English does not just fit the world. English fits the way you understand the world via your frames," he says. "And in politics they are morally based frames."

Decades ago, pollster Frank Luntz helped Republicans figure out the power of words. He showed them that voters are more likely to oppose the estate tax if it's called a "death tax." He found that Americans like oil drilling more if it's called "energy exploration."

"The phraseology determines the context. And the context determines success or failure," Luntz says.
Then, there's "reform." Ben Zimmer, executive producer of the Visual Thesaurus, says politicians of both parties tack that word onto any effort to change a program — from tax reform to immigration reform. "'Reform' is one of those terms that is very charged and helps to present one's own position as something positive — a way of advocating change in a positive light."

Reference