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Fourteen Years of Doublespeak

William Lutz

It has been sixteen years since NCTE passed a resolution on the dishonest and inhumane uses of language and a second resolution on the relation of language to public policy. And it has been fourteen years since the Committee on Public Doublespeak was established to put these resolutions into action. One of the functions of the committee is to alert the profession generally to the forces that in the committee's judgment are misusing the language: government and its military personnel, industry and its advertisers, educators, and all those who engage in public discourse, especially those who influence public policy.

In order to carry out this function, the committee established the Doublespeak Award, which it has been giving since 1974. The committee established also the Orwell Award, which it has been giving since 1975. And in 1974 the committee began publishing a newsletter which later became the *Quarterly Review of Doublespeak*. Other activities of the committee have included sponsoring the publication of books and other materials, providing speakers through its speakers' bureau, and organizing panels of speakers at various professional meetings.

Since the committee first began tracking doublespeak in public discourse, the use of doublespeak seems to have increased. Each year the *Quarterly Review of Doublespeak* carries more and more examples of doublespeak from business, education, government at all levels, the military, the world of medicine, and other areas. The April 1987 issue of *QRD* alone listed 103 examples of current doublespeak. Nor is the growth of doublespeak confined only to the United States. Recently, the Canadian Council of Teachers of

English established its Public Doublespeak Commission. And *QRD's* subscribers in twenty-one foreign countries regularly submit many examples of doublespeak current in their countries.

What is doublespeak? Doublespeak is language which pretends to communicate but really doesn't. It is language which makes the bad seem good, the negative appear positive, the unpleasant appear attractive, or at least tolerable. It is language which avoids or shifts responsibility, language which is at variance with its real or its purported meaning. It is language which conceals or prevents thought. Doublespeak is language which does not extend thought but limits it.

How can you identify doublespeak? Most of the time you will recognize doublespeak when you see or hear it. But if you have any doubts, you can identify doublespeak just by answering these questions: who is saying what to whom, under what conditions and circumstances, with what intent, and with what results? Answering these questions will usually identify the doublespeak in language which might otherwise appear to be legitimate or which might not even appear at first glance to be doublespeak.

For example, in 1981, President Ronald Reagan said, in a televised speech, "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 advertised as the President's position on Social Security, a subject of great 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 the move by some Republicans to cut benefits. However, five days after the speech, an article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* quoted White House Director of Communications David Gergen as saying that President Reagan's words had been "carefully chosen." What the President did mean, according to Gergen, was that the President was reserving the right to decide who was "dependent" on those benefits, who had "earned" them, and who, therefore, was "due" them. The remarks of David Gergen reveal the real intent of President Reagan as opposed to his apparent intent. As George Orwell wrote, "The great enemy of clear language is insincerity."

Where can you find doublespeak? Doublespeak can be found all around you. You are asked to check your packages at the desk "for your convenience" when it's not for your convenience at all but

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for someone else's convenience. You 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." Politicians do not speak of slums or ghettos but of the "inner city" or "sub-standard housing," where, by the way, the "disadvantaged" live. Non-profit organizations don't make a profit, they experience "revenue excesses" or have a "negative deficit." And people don't die these days; now it's "terminal living" or "negative patient care outcome."

There are no economic recessions but "periods of accelerated negative growth," or simply "negative economic growth." There is no acid rain, just "poorly buffered precipitation," or more impressively, "atmospheric deposition of anthropogenically derived acidic substances." And those aren't gangsters, mobsters, the Mafia, or La Cosa Nostra in Atlantic City, New Jersey; according to the New Jersey State Crime Control Commission they're just "members of a career-offender cartel."

In 1947 the name of the US Department of War was changed to the Department of Defense, thus giving us one of the most effective instances of doublespeak. How much easier it is to spend hun-

dreds of billions of dollars for defense instead of war. The invasion of the small island of Grenada was conducted not by the US Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines, but by the "Caribbean Peace Keeping Forces." According to the Pentagon, it was not an invasion of Grenada but a "predawn, vertical insertion." But then, in today's armed forces it's not a shovel but a "combat emplacement evacuator," not a "toothpick" but a "wood interdental stimulator," not a pencil but a "portable, hand-held communications inscriber," not a steel nut but a "hexiform rotatable surface compression unit," not a bullet hole but a "ballistically induced aperture in the subcutaneous environment." And the Army does not speak of killing the enemy; now it's called "servicing the target."

Doublespeak can also be found in countries other than the United States. At the Rolls Royce factory in Crewe, England, visitors are told that "our cars don't break down; occasionally, they fail to proceed." The *Times* of London carries letters in which writers decry the use of such language as "Public Waste Reception Centre" for dump, "human resource laboratory" for gymnasium, "environmental hygienist" for janitor, "simulator transparent" for tracing paper, "environmental physicist" for plumber, and "de-emphasiser" for girdle. British writers also reported on a pen described as "having negative vulnerability to water entry" and a weed-filled garden which had "deferred maintenance." In Canada it's not a fence but a "nonecological boundary," not a change of mind but a "displacement of goals," not a car wash but "vehicle appearance specialists," and it's not cutting down trees but "harvesting overmature timber." In Australia they don't have plows, they have "earth engaging equipment," while in Russia there are no prostitutes, just "ladies who take tips."

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 but "poorly buffered precipitation," so don't worry about all those dead trees. The judge wasn't addicted to the strong pain-killing drug he was

taking; it was just that the drug had “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,” so don’t worry about any violations of United States or international law. Doublespeak has become so common in our lives that we fail to notice it. Even worse, when we do notice doublespeak being used, we do not react; we do not protest. We have become cynical about the use of doublespeak, and worse, this cynicism has led to a cynicism about almost all public discourse, which we now call mere rhetoric.

Doublespeak which calls cab drivers “urban transportation specialists,” elevator operators “members of the vertical transportation corps,” automobile mechanics “automotive internists” can be considered humorous and relatively harmless. However, doublespeak which calls a fire in a nuclear reactor building “rapid oxidation,” an explosion in a nuclear power plant an “energetic disassembly,” the illegal overthrow of a legitimate government “destabilizing a government,” crimes “inappropriate actions,” and lies “inoperative statements” is language which attempts to avoid responsibility, which attempts to make the bad seem good, the negative appear positive, something unpleasant appear attractive, and which seems to communicate but doesn’t. It is language designed to alter our perception of reality and corrupt our minds. Such language does not provide the tools needed to develop and preserve civilization. Such language breeds suspicion, cynicism, distrust, and ultimately, hostility.

Doublespeak is insidious because it can infect and ultimately destroy the function of language—communication among people and social groups. If this corrupting process does occur, it can have serious and far-reaching consequences in a country which depends upon an informed electorate to make decisions in selecting candidates for office and deciding issues of public policy. The use of

doublespeak can spread so that doublespeak becomes the language of public discourse, with speakers and listeners convinced that they really understand such language. After a while we may really believe that politicians don’t lie but only “misspeak,” that illegal acts are merely “inappropriate actions,” that fraud and criminal conspiracy are just “miscertification.” President Jimmy Carter in April, 1980, could call the aborted raid to free the American hostages in Teheran an “incomplete success” and really believe that he had made a statement that clearly communicated with the American public. So, too, could President Ronald Reagan say in 1985 that “ultimately our security and our hopes for success at the arms reduction talks hinge on the determination that we show here to continue our program to rebuild and refortify our defenses” and really believe that greatly increasing the amount of money spent building new weapons will lead to a reduction in

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the number of weapons in the world. If we really believe that we understand such language and that such language communicates and promotes clear thought, then the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with its control of reality through language is not far away.

The task of English teachers is to teach not just the effective use of language but respect for language as well. Those who use language to conceal or prevent or corrupt thought must be called to account. Only by teaching respect for and love of language can teachers of English instill in students the sense of outrage they should experience when they encounter doublespeak. But before students can experience that outrage, they must first learn to use language effectively, to understand its beauty and power. Only then will we begin to make headway in the fight against doublespeak, for only by using language well will we come to appreciate the perversion inherent in doublespeak.

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