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Doublespeak: Using language to conceal the message in a political, military and medical context

ABSTRACT

Half a century has passed since Marshall McLuhan's 'The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man' came into being, introducing the now famous term 'global village', but the passing years have only added to the actuality of the phrase. In 2012 the world seems to have shrunk to the dimensions of one's own living room, where one can witness Alexander the Great's army defeating the Persians in the Battle of Issus in 333 BC, and contemporary Baghdad being bombed at night, all while having dinner.

In a world, where economic interests dictate the unleashing of global wars, controlling the proliferation of message content in the global village has become exponentially important. Confucius' rectification of names seems to have fallen from grace with the rulers of today: those in power have found a way to use language as a smoke screen – or a concave mirror – and words have been utilized to conceal meaning rather than convey it.

Doublespeak has become the norm of political and military language, as well as certain aspects of communication within a medical context: the general public has been willfully deceived into misinterpreting the message.

Keywords: doublespeak, deceptive language, spin, conceal message, global village, rectification of names, medical insurance

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Objective

The study aims at researching the meaning and origin of the term 'doublespeak', as well as its most prominent manifestations, so as to reach a conclusion regarding its nature and utilization, along with its social effects, based on prominent occurrences in the spheres of politics, war and contemporary medical insurance practices.

Language and Meaning

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, one of the functional definitions of language is: 'words and the methods of combining them for the expression of thought.'¹ It can, therefore, be concluded that meaning ('which a speaker or writer intends to express'²) is produced by a process of conscious selection and collocation.

Great thinkers have always understood the importance of said process – and the social implications of its intended results. Around 500 BC or earlier,³ the Analects introduced the Confucian doctrine of the 'rectification of names', according to which 'for every action, there is a word that describes that action.'⁴: 'If names be not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language be not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success.'⁵ Confucius further postulates that in the absence of name rectification 'the people do not know how to move hand or foot'⁶. This conclusion directs our attention to the fact that in a society where messages are deliberately obscured, chaos ultimately reigns in regards to social affairs.

Doublespeak

Doublespeak can be defined as 'language that deliberately disguises, distorts, or reverses the meaning of words.'⁷ The origin of the term is somewhat vague (although it could arguably be traced back to Orwell's prophetic book '1984' and more spe-

¹ *Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition, on CD-ROM Version 4.0*, Oxford University Press, 2009, definition 2a of 'language'.

² *Ibid.*, definition 2b of 'meaning'.

³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Analects> (October 27, 2012)

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rectification_of_names#Confucius (October 27, 2012)

⁵ <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/c/confucius/c748a/book13.html> (October 27, 2012)

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doublespeak> (October 27, 2012)

cifically to the concepts of 'Doublethink' and 'Newspeak')⁸. It is, however, clear that doublespeak is an aggressive version of a socially destructive linguistic activity, described by Confucius 2,500 years earlier.

Doublespeak is not the same as euphemism, as the latter can be used 'appropriately and without the intention to deceive'⁹. Nevertheless, some instances of doublespeak rely on the same mechanism of 'making the truth less unpleasant'¹⁰. It is important, however, to point out that the former cannot be simply viewed as a subcategory of the latter, as doublespeak can be non-euphemistic.

Functional Environment of Misleading Language

The Scientific Alliance – a non-profit organization, based in Cambridge – has published online an article named 'Misleading Language', whose introductory paragraph is worth quoting here: 'Use of language is one of the main factors which defines humanity. At its best, it cannot only express our deepest feelings and be a source of great beauty, but also put across complex concepts with clarity and lack of ambiguity. However, language can also be misused and be deliberately misleading. Most obviously, this is in the form of propaganda, but more subtle misuse can be just as bad. This is as true in the case of science as for politics, finance or other areas.'¹¹

The word *politics* is etymologically derived from the Greek πολιτικός or 'pertaining to citizens, civic, civil'¹². But collocating it next to 'finance' in the above definition is not a coincidence. The politics of today often have less to do with the common citizen, and much more – with corporate money and power.

The third word, conspicuously missing from the above definition, is 'war'.

Doublespeak in a Military Context

As Julie Redstone points out: 'War has many facets. It involves military engagement. It involves economic support. It involves the creation of an infrastructure. And it involves the choice of a particular language which shapes public opinion.'¹³

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ <http://www.scientific-alliance.org/scientific-alliance-newsletter/misleading-language> (October 27, 2012)

¹² *Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition, on CD-ROM Version 4.0*, Oxford University Press, 2009, etymology of 'politic'.

¹³ http://lightomega.org/worldwatch/America/Language_of_War.html (October 27, 2012)

Finances, politics and war go hand in hand in their treatment of language as a tool to manipulate the message. As early as 250 BC, a Macedonian commander named Antigonus Gonatas 'refused to admit that he had retreated and instead described [it] as a strategic movement to the rear'¹⁴.

Retreat, as a humiliating development within a military campaign (and thus – a difficult piece of news to break), seems to have produced more than its fair share of doublespeak messages. It has been referred to as 'adjustment of the front', a 'retrograde maneuver', a 'redeployment of forces'¹⁵. When we are told that 'our troops have engaged the enemy on all sides' this may not be a reason to rejoice as it most probably means that our forces have been ambushed, and soldiers are being slaughtered.

But retreat is not the only military reality that may need doublespeak techniques to sweeten the message. War offensives themselves may be rather ungainly and in need of a linguistic spin: 'Defenseless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called pacification. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called transfer of population or rectification of frontiers. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called elimination of unreliable elements. Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them.'¹⁶

David Guyatt in his article 'Killing me softly' points out that nowadays some types of assault weaponry is referred to in a more agreeable manner – as 'non lethal' or 'less than lethal'. The author writes that 'both descriptions remain interchangeable and, today, are often "packaged" along with another military euphemism: 'Soft Kill Technologies'. Blood, guts and especially death are no longer politically acceptable.'¹⁷

A designated Doublespeak Award has been given on an annual basis as an 'ironic tribute to public speakers who have perpetuated language that is grossly deceptive, evasive, euphemistic, confusing, or self-centered.' It has been issued by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) since 1974. The recipients of the Doublespeak Award are usually politicians, national administrations or departments. An example of this is the United States Department of Defense, which won the award three times in 1991, 1993, and 2001 respectively. For the 1991 award, the United

¹⁴ <http://cocobear80.blogspot.com/2006/01/military-euphemisms.html> (October 27, 2012)

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/orwell46.htm> (October 27, 2012)

¹⁷ http://www.deepblacklies.co.uk/killing_me_softly.htm (October 27, 2012)

States Department of Defense 'swept the first six places in the Doublespeak top ten' for using euphemisms like 'servicing the target' (bombing) and 'force packages' (warplanes).¹⁸

Doublespeak in a Political Context

In his profound and candid text 'Politics and the English Language', George Orwell wrote: 'Now, it is clear that the decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes: it is not due simply to the bad influence of this or that individual writer.'¹⁹

Politicians seem to exhibit an acute sensitivity about the linguistic mishaps of their opponents, while in opposition, but tend to employ similar techniques to influence public opinion when in office: 'In his speech on national security before the American Enterprise Institute on May 21, former Vice President Dick Cheney complained of the 'emergence of euphemisms [under the Obama administration] that strive to put an imaginary distance between the American people and the terrorist enemy. 'Instead of being properly at war with terrorists and other "killers and would-be mass murderers, we were now involved,' Cheney dismissively noted, 'in so-called "overseas contingency operations," a catch-all term adopted by the Obama administration in place of the previous administration's "war on terror."

Yet for all of Cheney's posturing about the allegedly milquetoast euphemisms of Obama, he persisted in repeatedly invoking "enhanced interrogation" for methods of torture (such as waterboarding) that have been previously prosecuted as war crimes by the United States.²⁰

Thus misleading language has become commonplace even at the highest level of official government discourse. In his statement at the news conference on Feb. 15, 2011 President Obama detailed that 'What [his] budget does is to put forward some tough choices, some significant spending cuts, so that by the middle of this decade, our annual spending will match our annual revenues. We will not be adding more to the national debt. To use a sort of an analogy that families are familiar with, we're not going to be running up the credit card anymore. That's important, and that's hard to do, but it's necessary to do.'²¹ Following a question by a journalist present at

¹⁸ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doublespeak> (October 27, 2012)

¹⁹ <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/orwell46.htm> (October 27, 2012)

²⁰ <http://hnn.us/articles/88504.html> (October 27, 2012)

²¹ http://voices.washingtonpost.com/fact-checker/2011/02/obamas_misleading_language_on.html (October 27, 2012)

the news conference, the President was then forced to admit that 'he was excluding the interest on the debt when he declared 'we will not be adding more to the national debt.' He was talking about a budgetary concept known as "primary balance," in which the government spends no more than it collects, not counting interest payments.'

The President knowingly misrepresented the facts as he knew them.

Doublespeak in the Global Village

Half a century has passed since Marshall McLuhan's 'The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man' came into being, introducing the now famous term 'global village', but the passing years have only added to the actuality of the phrase. In 2012 the world seems to have shrunk to the dimensions of one's own living room, where one can witness Alexander the Great's army defeating the Persians in the Battle of Issus in 333 BC, and contemporary Baghdad being bombed at night, all while having dinner.

As a side effect, mass media has made the proliferation of doublespeak messages easier than ever, thus multiplying their strength.

Communism has failed, but it seems that Capitalism in its present state will not be around long enough to celebrate its demise. The unpalatable truth of the deepening economic crisis, large scale money printing and the resulting inflation requires the use of even bigger and deeper smoke screens. 'In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible.'²²

Language as War

The famous aphorism by Carl von Clausewitz states that 'War is the continuation of politics by other means', but it could also be argued that doublespeak, in its turn, is the continuation of war by other means.

'A lie told often enough becomes the truth.', used to say Lenin, and we have to agree that multibillion news businesses like CNN, whose foreign reporters do not mind staging the occasional street battle, are indeed the voice of a legion, heard through a megaphone, louder than anything we have ever heard.

²² <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/orwell46.htm> (October 27, 2012)

Doublespeak in a Medical Discourse

What could be the common ground shared by war and the most humane of sciences – medicine? Physician-author Richard Asher coined the term 'medspeak' to refer to the special blend of doublespeak and moral relativity often used in medicine.²³ David Woods, the Editor-in-chief of the Canadian Medical Association Journal has supplied the following examples: 'the poor have become "the underprivileged"; drug addicts are "the chemically dependent"; and children of low intelligence are "exceptional students"'.²⁴

While the above tend to conceal the meaning from the untrained ear, but are generally harmless, other doublespeak medical terms have a far darker purpose.

It seems that insurance professionals in the US have found a way to deny patients coverage of medical costs under supposedly comprehensive insurance policies by putting legal language to 'good use'. As award-winning filmmaker Michael Moore explains in his documentary 'Sicko' obscure terms such as 'pre-existing condition' are skillfully used to manipulate and make legally viable the denial to reimburse medical costs. As per the definition of said term: 'A pre-existing condition is a risk with extant causes that is not readily compensated by standard, affordable insurance premiums.'²⁵ Unfortunately, insurance companies have taken liberties when defining such risks, and also by setting the 'maximum pre-existing condition exclusion period' which could vary from 6 months in Massachusetts to 10 years in Indiana, and even be an indefinite period of time in a number of states, among which Arizona, District of Columbia, Louisiana, Missouri, etc.²⁶ President Obama, in his health-care speech, delivered in March of 2010, proposed reforms that 'would end the worst practices of insurance companies. No longer would they be able to deny your coverage because of a pre-existing condition.'²⁷

It also seems that oftentimes when a patient needs expensive medicine which could potentially save his life, the cure is dubbed 'experimental' and as such it falls under a special clause of the policy, set up for the purpose of denying coverage to patients, who happen to need it most. 'Although clinical trials and experimental medical treatments have the potential to increase both the length and quality of a person's

²³ <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1491368/pdf/cmaj00127-0009.pdf> (October 27, 2012)

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pre-existing_condition#Current_and_pending_pre-existing_condition_exclusion_regulation_in_the_United_States (October 27, 2012)

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ <http://www.marketwatch.com/story/full-text-of-president-obamas-health-care-speech-2010-03-03> (October 27, 2012)

life, insurance companies often refuse to pay for untried and costly medical procedures. With new treatment therapies constantly evolving, insurers find themselves in the position of coming up with ways to cut rising health insurance costs. Consequently, experimental treatments are often among the first medical expenses an insurance provider denies.²⁸

Earl P. Steinberg, Sean Tunis, and David Shapiro in their report 'Insurance Coverage for Experimental Technologies' further argue that 'had insurers, including Medicare, not paid the costs associated with "unproven" technologies in the past, many of the innovations for which American medicine is lauded might not have come to pass. Insurers' reluctance [...] could curtail the development of new technologies and threaten our health care system's ability to keep up the pace of helpful innovations.'²⁹

Conclusion

Although using language to conceal the meaning was considered a socially disruptive practice as early as 500 BC, its utilization seems to have intensified in the era of mass media and globalism – and especially so in the spheres of politics, war and medicine. Its ill effects have been recognized at the highest levels, but nevertheless doublespeak remains the tool of choice when difficult news have to be announced or public opinion has to be manipulated to serve the interests of the few and powerful.

The use of doublespeak in medicine can serve as a good example of its destructive effects – curtailing the development of new technologies and directly endangering human life.

Public interest in said phenomena has intensified in recent years with awareness of its negative influence possibly bringing about positive change.

²⁸ http://www.ehow.com/info_8378632_health-insurance-experimental-treatments.html (October 27, 2012)

²⁹ <http://content.healthaffairs.org/content/14/4/143.full.pdf> (October 27, 2012)