

Using the Same Words to Reveal or Conceal

Written by Alex Baer

Friday, 18 January 2013 20:00

It's a chicken-and-egg sort of a situation, wondering how much language determines thought, and the amount that's the other way around. Maybe there's no way to know which came first, or whether it's at all relevant -- or if "both" is the correct answer.

Somehow, I find it easy to get distracted by such chicken-and-egg considerations, especially whenever the feathers really get flying at the Congressional chicken coop, and when every besotted member of that prideful roost feels the urgent, imperious need to crow, squawk, cry, or flail around in the dirt and mud.

While it is not useful behavior, it does provide backers, constituents, and media a puffed-up show of Big Foul's power, I suppose. (Although just why it is these chicken-hawks, chicken-hearts, and youngsters-playing-chicken would *want* to advertise such empty, boneheaded actions is anyone's guess.)

These periodic explosions of feathers and eruptions of busy-beaked cacophony are also twin signals that the adults have left the room, leaving the children to govern. Thing is, all of these children are hitting the full stride of their Terrible Twos all at once, en masse, as a terrorizing group.

This stage of development of our leaders of state helps explain why it is all those members have their arms uniformly folded across chests, their heels dug in, and their easy familiarity and stabbing overuse of the word "no." It goes a long way to explaining the unending string of hateful, belligerent temper tantrums, too. The blue language and purple prose of these GOP outbursts can leave the oldest, tale-telling salt with a set of glowing, red ears.

(Boehner's recent, impossible biological instructions to Reid, for example: How to see that one as professional communication from a statesman concerned about doing the People's business, and not as a profanity spat from a petty thug?)

From the look of things, GOP members appear to be slow learners, based on the number of diapers spotted, clearly worn and on proud display, there on the floor of both houses. The constant screech of their creepy screeds can be heard all throughout the Capitol, signaling their

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obstructionist intents and, perhaps, also signaling a full diaper, and a cry for adult intervention and help.

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Sapir and Whorf might have gotten caught up in such goings-on, out on another of their linguistic-relativity fishing trips. It's a fascinating business, trying to grasp some routine basics of linguistic anthropology, with more than a little psychology, philosophy, and sociology mixed in on the side for good measure.

Such detective work may be necessary if we are to keep hope alive that, someday, any sane representative of The People will be able to communicate with a GOP member of Congress in any meaningful way.

Given the way most members of Congress muddle and muck about, celebrating their lack of clarity and cooperation in their effective communications, they might as well be members of different cultures, eras, species, dimensions, and/or planets.

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How do our thoughts form? Do they build themselves from the rudimentary blocks of our language, or is the language itself guiding thoughts through various corridor-sets? Maybe it's all wrong, or both. Perhaps they stair-step back and forth, first leaning and then supporting some leaning, bouncing back and forth like strengthening interleaves.

Maybe we deal in meta-languages, as some believe, making a pre-language in our minds that have been dubbed "mentalese." Perhaps it's all a parade of pictures and mental images bounding around upstairs, combining and recombining as various needs or desires strike.

How do even the simplest thoughts get conveyed, when one member is from a modern, western

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culture, and the other from what is usually euphemistically called a more primitive society? The same thought -- being thirsty and wanting a drink of water, for example: How will it arrive in each mind, how will it be transmitted, and how will it be received?

The whole business is trickier, tougher, and more deceiving than we think. It doesn't help that everyone with a keyboard is obviously a writer, and everyone who can talk and hear is a talk show host. (*We all think this is the case, of course. This helps us keep our opinions flowing, and having them always be far more correct and right than anyone else's.*)

Of course, lawyers and public relations experts will advise us all to keep our lips zipped, and leave the communications to the professionals, and not try this tricky, dangerous stuff at home. Fat chance of *anyone* listening to *that*.

We need to learn all we can about communication to get past the perpetual cycles of impasse we're now in. Call it what you will: deadlock or gridlock, or stalemate, standoff, and standstill. It seems we in this country have developed a gourmet taste for dead ends, blind alleys and box canyons.

We're in an era of challenges to civil discourse and basic civics. We routinely use language to conceal rather than reveal -- some would say this is the time of Big Lies.

Some of our monkeying around with the mother tongue can be attributed to attempts to be less harsh, cruel, and judgmental in our daily speech. Over time, we've tried to show more sensitivity in our language, trying to eliminate words like "retarded" and "handicapped" from our speech, along with many others. But, we all still struggle with the built-in battles of he/she constructs within our cultural tongues.

Somewhere, though, we started using language as leverage and as tools in our personal and social propaganda wars. People like GOP darling and evil genius Frank Luntz focus-grouped the heck out of language in order to build hot-button support for their crazy ideas in a catchy phrase, one that simultaneously bashed opposing notions at the same time, with the very same phrase.

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Thus, "government spending" became "waste," "capitalism" was transformed into "the free market," and "Social Security insurance plan payments" that one has paid into, like any insurance plan, magically became "entitlements."

That "invisible hand of the free market" became shorthand for "let the robber barons loot and pillage at will."

You probably know hundreds of examples of these constructs yourself, and have been exposed to hundreds more. Does "death tax" ring a bell for you in descriptions of the "estate tax" in discussions? How about "energy independence" for "off-shore" and "Arctic drilling" that's really being discussed?

Maybe you prefer "clean coal" as an excuse to remove mountaintops and poison communities and landscapes at such lengths that neither will ever spring back?

How far would you care to go in trying to explain any possible benefit for everyday workers in the wrongheaded phrase "Right To Work"?

GOP strategists, like Lee Atwater, have always found ways to hide ugly truths beneath cozy words and phrases. (Check out some of the names sometime of all the right-wingnut think tanks and politically-motivated groups: They all sound like pillars of Constitutional justice and the American dream -- all while gutting every trace of freedom and decency left.)

Atwater found many ways to say truly ugly things, but doing so in a slightly perfumed way. These are the things that all Republicans want to say out in the open, but prefer the cover of doing so in a disguised, dog-whistle way.

One example: How often have you heard "states' rights" doubling for any number of racist ideas sneaking around in the bushes at night, all of those ugly ideas afraid to show up in full light?

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It goes on and on. There's big Republican money to be made, test-driving hot-button concepts, camouflaged language, and perfecting the wordy sleight of hand needed to skew them all far, far right.

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"It's a beautiful thing, the destruction of words." -- George Orwell, 1984

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Wouldn't we all be better served by words and phrases that serve the real truth, rather than choose phrases that hide behind it? Which is more truthful to say, for example: "The soldier has PTSD," or, "The soldier is mentally wounded"?

(I'd suggest "spiritually wounded" as an option, too -- except every nutball Bible- pounder would want to ride right in on the coattails of that one, where they do not belong.)

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George Orwell referred to language as the ultimate weapon. His name became synonymous for the dark implications of the totalitarianism. One of his many quotes provides stark insight into our which-drives-what considerations of language and thought: "But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought."

Orwell really nailed the GOP, Fox, Rush, and all the other demon dogs, and many decades before they came to pass. Downright Orwellian, as we'd say today. He certainly predicted the predicament we're all in, and told us what condition our condition was in.

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"Power is in tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again in new shapes of your own choosing." □ -- George Orwell, 1984

I read words like this, and I cannot think of better examples than the GOP and their driveling, sniveling, foamy-mouthed hordes at Fox -- the entire stable of psychopaths billed as political entertainers.

To paraphrase Orwell: *If you want a vision of the future, imagine Glenn Beck stamping on a human face -- forever.*

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Confucius would be another wonderful guest to have on hand at a fantasy dinner, helping balance out the potential dryness of Sapir and Whorf, and the depressing truthfulness of Orwell. After all: How could anyone resist someone who said, "Life is really simple, but we insist on making it complicated," -- or, someone who noted that the first step in improving a society is often begun with correcting its language?

Anyone who says, "When a wise man points at the moon, the imbecile examines the finger," is all right with me, and much deserving of the pole position, a spot nearest the bar or dessert cart, or anywhere else they want to sit.

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I spotted some more *reveal-conceal* examples in a political piece, showing how useless new-speak phrases are that have been created by spin-meisters trying only to sour, stain, and then change public opinion -- all while purporting to describe something allegedly innocent, neutral, or pure.

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With the wave of a crooked GOP wand, "earned benefits" become "entitlements." "Fair rates of pay" become "redistribution of wealth" or "class warfare," and so on. How often have you seen "family values" paraded around as a cover for various Neanderthal causes, for God myths, or for homophobes to rally around?

The piece made a good case, wondering why it was liberals were not fighting back, turning that kind of manipulative, sneaky speech on its head by re-coining the right-wingnut phrases right back at them. "Government spending" could get turned into "taxpayer investments."

All those poor, innocent "job creators" we've heard so much about? They get changed back into what they really are: "robber barons," "workforce dependents," and those whose idea of a hard day at work is lounging by the pool, soaking up the sun along with their interest checks. In this same way, "corporate lobbyists" get painted for what they really are: "unelected legislators."

(Seems to me if *anything* was to become an "entitlement," that particular word should be reserved to accurately describe one of two things: the endless flow of welfare and subsidies to corporations, or to describe the sense of ownership the rich and privileged feel toward this country and their own position.)

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Children, however, are the original lobbyists of the world. They will wheedle, plead, finagle, and hammer at you until they get what they want. They will do so relentlessly and without mercy. This is one of the key reasons GOP members of Congress are acting like such children at every possible turn.

Oh, verily: Would that we could upend them on our adult laps and apply some *old-fashioned learnin'* in that often-hollered "family values" vein of theirs. "Spare the rod," their philosophy tells you, "and spoil the brat." It's a good thought, applying that steering method to members of Congress, but it's more than a little late for that.

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Instead, I suggest we all better bone up on how best to manage the sullen sulkiness of 278 GOP members of Congress forever stuck in their Terrible Twos.

(If nothing else, this may help the 14 Blue Dogs in the 113th sober up, remember their roots, and pick just one side of the street to drive on -- rather than traveling sideways, diagonally, trying to cover all the right-hand lanes, too.)

It never used to be this much of a *now you see it, now you don't* sort of world. Common sense, an onboard moral code, knowledge of the Golden Rule, and an unspoken agreement to work together all used to suffice.

Of course, that was before the deep, new GOP psychoses and the corporate greed really kicked in -- way back, under Reagan, where busting up unions and quadrupling the nation debt endeared him to right-wingnut lunatics every bit as much then as now.

Talk about playing hide and seek with the truth...

Terrible Twos: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terrible_twos

and: <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/terrible-twos/AN02124>

Sapir & Whorf: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Linguistic_relativity

GOP headcount: http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/cong.aspx

Using the Same Words to Reveal or Conceal

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Blue Dog tailcount: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blue_Dog_Coalition

Bonus 1984 Quote: "What can you do, thought Winston, against the lunatic who is more intelligent than yourself, who gives your arguments a fair hearing and then simply persists in his lunacy?"

Bonus Factoids: Insanity is often characterized as doing the same thing over and over, and expecting different results. How then to explain Republicans spending \$50 million of taxpayer dollars, voting 33 times to unsuccessfully repeal "Obamacare"... and how else to explain GOP Rep. Michele Bachmann bringing it up again in the 113th Congress, as her *first* order of business upon returning?

Info: <http://thinkprogress.org/health/2013/01/03/1394071/bachmann-repeal-obamacare/>

and: <http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2013/01/16/bachmann-cant-find-a-co-sponsor-for-her-repeal-obamacare-bill/>