An endless coded stream

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A brief review of our changing language

A BRIEF look at the debate between sociolinguists and linguists with some examples of euphemisms that have surfaced into common usage offers revealing insights reflecting contemporary social perceptions. Sociolinguists who investigate the role and function of language are not so much concerned with the way language utterances are generated and constructed as with the ways that language is used in society as a means to communicate. Traditionally, linguists steered clear of the murky waters of social relevance and social context in use, believing that it is a study that cannot yield predictions of future usage, be measured objectively, or tested for accuracy.

In the 1950s, dissatisfaction with current linguistic theories and the ever-expanding awareness of the role of language as a coded reflection of social dynamics gave birth to the term 'sociolingusitics'. Sociolingusitics encompasses the vast realm of human language behavior in all social dynamics as expressed in social class, gender distinctions, varieties of the spoken language, language diversity, language acquisition, semiotics, and language as a tool or weapon, to name but a sampling of the specific areas within the field. The elastic parameters of sociolingusitics coupled with the inability to apply strict scientific methodology define the study as a soft science. To sociolinguists, it seems evident that to study grammars divorced from context can never be an objective science since there are endless aspects of the communicative dynamic that are not addressed by the discussion and description of the sound/meaning connection. It is impossible to ignore those factors that are mysterious, yet impact on meaning and communication. Changing social perspectives are reflected in usage.

In 1758, Samuel Johnson, who compiled *The Dictionary of the English Language*, expressed the difference between linguistics and language, noted that 'language is only the instrument of science and words are but the signs of ideas'. The attempt to define what language is and whether the study of it can be properly classified as a science continues today. Whether it is possible to study language in a vacuum without reference to context is an ongoing debate and a reoccurring theme of those interested in the study of language. Dr. Suzanne Romaine, in *Language in Society* (1994) summed up the basic thesis of Sociolinguists; '…language has no existence apart from the social reality of its users… [I]t does not exist on its own and it does not reflect some preexisting reality'.[1]

Noam Chomsky, celebrated linguist, political activist, and writer, maintains that language can be studied as objectively as any other science and that the observations on the use of language is an altogether different area of study.

Victor Yngve, noted researcher and professor of Information Science, Linguistics, and Behavioral Science at the University of Chicago, and author of *Linguistics as a Science* (1986), proposed that the study of linguistics be approached in a new way, which he defined as *scientific linguistics*. He explained that the attempt to study *grammatical linguistics* as a

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science is impossible because 'the objects of language are not objects of nature given in advance; they are only created by a point of view'.[2] Yngve defines the task as 'the scientific study of how people communicate' and suggests that by following standard scientific methodology of observation and testing,

> …linguistic generalizations can be formulated in terms of properties of particular persons and particular groups. With these generalizations we will be able to develop specific causal laws of communicative behavior, which should then lead to a proper understanding of how people communicate.[3]

Yngve further discusses investigative methods and gives examples of how to set up formulas and controls whereby communicative behavior can be studied in context and follow scientific procedures of observation and hypothesis testing. He refers to many unanswered questions in language use, such as the use and comprehension of metaphor, irony, figurative speech, and promise making, among others. If linguistics is to be considered a science, the explanation for these baffling linguistic puzzles (for example, how does a listener understands the non-literal meaning conveyed in irony or sarcasm?) must be worked into any comprehensive equation that attempts to analyze the structure of language.

Yngve praises the insightful work of sociologist Erving Goffman, who has done extensive work on group communicative dynamics, but observes that:

> Neither traditional linguistic theory nor modern formal linguistics provides support for treating such observations. They completely lack any apparatus suited to confronting phenomena of this order. Thus the linguistics of language is largely innocent of any connection with social communicative phenomena…here we have two disciplines, current sociology and current linguistics in business as usual, both dealing centrally with human communications, and they are as separate as two islands.[4]

In recent decades, English has spawned thousands of new vocabulary words and expressions to accommodate emerging technology. Evolving perspectives on politics, consumerism, gender issues, military strategies, and globalization require a new vocabulary that in turn shapes perceptions and actions.

Political propaganda, especially unbridled during election years, is an obvious example of language being used as a tool of political persuasion. Political advertising can be either subtle or blatant depending on the stakes. Vast resources are collected and spent in the competition to gain or hold power in a battle fought primarily with language that is artfully manipulated to persuade, deny, support, exaggerate, reveal and conceal information.

One of the most obvious and familiar political examples includes the understanding that one country's terrorist is another's freedom fighter. Yasser Arafat is but one example of someone who was internationally perceived as a terrorist, but fifteen years later was accorded great respect as a freedom fighter guiding his nation to liberation. Any international leader who is described by the media as the devil incarnate in one decade may well be praised in another decade for progressive leadership. Since few of us have ever met or will ever meet these influential few, much less engage in meaningful dialogue with them, our opinions result totally from information provided to us by the media.

Propaganda is the manipulation of opinion through language or images. As the words change, our images and perceptions also undergo adjustments and modifications that subtly conform to the desired perception. In his controversial essay titled 'The Manufacture of Consent' (1987), Noam Chomsky commented:

> The process of creating and entrenching highly selective, reshaped, or completely fabricated memories of the past is what we call 'indoctrination' or 'propaganda' when it is conducted by official enemies, and 'education,' 'moral instruction' or 'character building' when we do it ourselves.[5]

Even the word *propaganda*, when used in English, is seen as too loaded a word to be used to describe political activities on the home front. Instead, it is reserved to describe political pressure applied to people in alien nations that at the time are not on our team. Consider:

> The citizens of Nicaragua/Sri Lanka/Niger, responding to a powerful propaganda campaign, flooded the cities to cast their ballots in the election.

If *Montana*, *Arizona*, or *Canada* is substituted, the sentence suddenly shrieks with new meaning, and a reader will assume the author to be on the far left of the political spectrum. We understand that the word *propaganda* is taboo when describing politics at home. Again, in the sentence above, consider the difference when

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we substitute *a privately funded education program* for *propaganda campaign*. An interested reader might wonder who or what sponsored or funded the 'education program' and seek further information. It is unlikely that the author's politics would come into question.

The vocabulary coined as a result of new technology in the past decade keeps the lexicographers busy and many of us are left in the dust in the mad proliferation of terms. Though no one disputes that the new technology requires new vocabulary, a literate and educated person who is unfamiliar with computer terminology will be frustrated by such a seemingly indecipherable instruction as:

> If a text entry is too long to fit in a cell, it overlaps the adjacent cells. Wrap the text in the cell to see the entire entry (see Changing the Appearance of cell data on pages 6–7…(which says)…You can change a cell's data or formula by selecting the cell, making your changes in the entry bar, and then accepting the entry.[6]

Neil Postman has written extensively on the effects and ramifications of recent technology on culture. It was Postman's thesis that the adulation of computers and other technology would rapidly and insidiously lead to what he calls a 'technopoly'.

In the opening chapter of *Technopoly*, Postman observes that the new technology has transformed society in substantial ways. 'Technology imperiously commandeers our most important terminology. It redefines "freedom", "truth", "intelligence", "fact", "wisdom", and "history" — all the words we live by.'[7] Later in his discussion, he speaks specifically about the new vocabulary that has arisen as a result of the technological advances: 'The metaphor of the machine as human (or the human as machine) is sufficiently powerful to have made serious inroads in everyday language. People now commonly speak of "programming" or "deprogramming" themselves. They speak of their brains as a piece of "hard wiring", capable of "retrieving data", and it has become common to think about thinking as a mere matter of processing and decoding.' (p. 113).

Postman further describes the introduction of words like *virus, infected* computers, programs made to *sterilize* the network; and language, which he claims is

> not merely picturesque anthropomorphism. It reflects a profound shift in perception about the relationship of computers to humans. If computers can become ill, then they can become healthy. Once healthy, they can think clearly and make decisions. The computer, it is implied, has a will, has intentions, and has reasons – which means that humans are relieved or responsibility for the computer's decisions. Through a curious form of grammatical alchemy, the sentence 'We use the computer to calculate' comes to mean 'The computer calculates'… That is what bank tellers mean when they tell you that they cannot say how much money is in your account because 'the computers are down'. The implication, of course, is that no person at the bank is responsible.... When this happens, we have relinquished control, which in the case of the computer means that we may, without excessive remorse, pursue ill-advised or even inhuman goals because the computer can accomplish them or be imagined to accomplish them.[8]

This is not as far-fetched as it may sound. We all recall the computer calendar crisis of 2000. The media sponsored panel discussions among computer experts to inform the public that computers were not programmed to make the necessary calendar adjustments for the new millennium. The ramifications of this error of negligence were predicted to be catastrophic. The hype was intense, and, four years before the dreaded date, the *Daily Yomiuri* in Japan prepared its citizens by listing the dire consequences of the approaching calamity:

> If the problem isn't fixed, here are some of the things that will happen:
> Vital military and defense systems will shut down.
> Taxpayers will receive notices from the IRS saying they owe millions of dollars in back taxes.
> Banks will shut off credit and send foreclosure notices to millions.
> Social Security, Medicare and other government benefit programs based on age will not function.
> Thousands of airplanes all over the world will be grounded when records show that maintenance has not been done for 100 years.
> For the same reason, prison records will show criminals overdue for release.[9]

The article ominously concluded that certain programs were deliberately written in obscure programming languages…by one or two people using top-secret technology and cannot be addressed by off-the-shelf software'[10]

Curiously, lack of foresight on the part of human computer program experts was not

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mentioned. The computer itself was about to be indicted for the disasters. Responsibility, and therefore blame, were deleted from the equation.

In recent years, books and articles on sexist language and the linguistics of gender have flourished. More than twenty-five years ago editor Mary Vetterling-Braggin (1981) in her introduction to *Sexist Language*, a collection of essays about rampant sexism embedded in language, wrote:

> The claim that ordinary language is sexist is by no means new. In 1895 Elizabeth Cady Stanton dramatized what she saw as the unjust way in which women are written and spoken about by rewriting the Bible to eliminate its sexist language. But what is new is… getting people to think about this claim and the extent to which it is a source of debate even in ordinary conversation.[11]

Though many of the experimental new words reflecting a change in the perception of male/female roles in society did not survive debate and became the source of much humor, such as 'herstory' as an addition to 'history', Ms., his/her, chairperson, and innumerable others have been absorbed unquestioningly by a new generation. As late as 1978, meteorologists added men's names in equal measure in the personification of tropical storms and hurricanes. As more women entered the work force, new problems arose as women challenged accepted male/female roles. Women who found themselves in what had always been predominantly male-dominated work environments found themselves the target of unwanted male attention and *sexual harassment* became a legally defined, punishable offence, recognized by the courts.

At the same time, English continues to reflect the social attitudes that have prevailed and by examining words and their usage, we can easily trace the history of male/female social dynamics through the centuries. Dwight Bolinger (1980), author of *Language – The Loaded Weapon*, discusses language about women:

> The language is mined with expressions that reflect women's status as a commodity, despite the disappearance long since of prearranged marriages and obsolescence of promises to love, honor, and obey. A radio ad for homeowner loans carries the sentence *We married off our last daughter*. The phrase *marry off* would never be used of male offspring except a joke; it smacks of *auction off* and *sell off*.[12]

Though Bolinger accurately predicted that as the social, economic, and professional parameters for women expanded, attitudes would change, his conclusion to the chapter on sexism, 'Roles are made over but stereotypes remain – epithets we no longer use but that linger in consciousness, attitudes that prevent the full realization of our beliefs, weapons still in the hands of the ignorant, or of those who fell threatened by change. The gun of sex-biased language may be rusty, but it is there, and the greatest danger is unawareness that it is a gun, and it is loaded,'[13] still remains true today.

In the last two decades, popular psychology and sociology spawned a plethora of new jargon and descriptive language, reflecting new ways of placing or identifying ourselves in the broader social dynamic. Vocabulary such as *surrogate-, birth-, and biological-mothers, gay empowerment, gay rights, recovered memories, gratuitous violence, ageism, dysfunctional families, multiple-personality, obsessive-compulsive and bipolar disorders, passive-aggressive behaviour, co-dependency, the-child-in-you*, *Gulf War Syndrome* and countless other *syndromes* is no longer baffling.

In addition to these new words, old words are re-dressed and we find novel euphemisms identified as *politically correct* terminology, a concept which then resulted in the creation of such examples as *vertically challenged, differently abled* and *visually challenged*, to name but a few. Occupations are renamed as, for example: *sanitation engineers* (garbage collectors), *exterminating engineers* (pest controllers), *maintenance custodians* (janitors), *communications personnel* (telephone operators), *surrogate wives* (authority-sanctioned prostitutes for prisoners), and *domestic engineers* (housewives), or *career change opportunity, outplaced* and *vocationally relocated* ('advantages' resulting from company *down-sizing*), for example. The unemployed are described as *economically abused* (poor) or *economically inactive* (out of work). School psychologists have given us *educationally challenged, learning disorder, verbally deficient* and *attention deficit disorder*. Hospitals, banks, the federal government, and the media enthusiastically contribute to this balderdash with *health alteration, negative patient care, human resources* (personnel), *financial intermediaries* (loan officers), *equity retreat* (stock market fall) *revenue enhancement* (taxation), *period of negative economic growth* (recession) – and *spin doctors*.

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Consider the euphemisms boldly employed by the military, such as the names given to intercontinental ballistic missiles, such as *Peace Keepers* and *Patriot*, or the introduction of *mission* for 'raid'. The military, through its proliferating use of euphemisms, seeks to calm a public that could, should its conscience be provoked enough, refuse to support military activities by limiting or denying financial and political support. The use of such terms as *soft targets* (people), *hard targets* (buildings), *destabilize* (overthrow governments), *positive containments, termination with extreme prejudice* (kill), *LIC* (low-intensity conflict), *collateral damage, delivery vehicle* (missile carrying a bomb), *mini-nukes*, *bomblet* and *low-yield nuclear earth-penetrating weapon* serve, as do all euphemisms, to shield us from an offensive or unpleasant reality, yet they reveal far more than they conceal. Recently, the Pentagon delayed informing the family of Pat Tillman, a popular American football player who joined the US military, that he had been killed by *friendly fire* or *blue on blue*, the commonly used euphemism that seeks to divert blame and attributes such *non-hostile fire* to the *fog of war*.

Another example of how language reflects and forms the attitudes and current values of the times is the story of the Mayor of Cannes who, in 1996, was canned (but not caned) for his involvement in a cagey casino scheme. Popular and considered charming, he was accused of *passive corruption*[14], a term coined to mean that a criminal activity was carried out by others, but that the accused's proximity to the criminal event is acknowledged. It sneakily replaces the more familiar idea of *(suspected) accomplice*, which unfortunately suggests intentional involvement in a criminal activity, thereby assigning responsibility to the perpetrators. The term *passive corruption* clearly removes blame and responsibility and through the clever pairing of the two words, we are given a new way to think about criminal activity and involvement. In short, the accused becomes a victim who gains our sympathy and is *in fact* already forgiven or excused for his possibly criminal or illegal behaviour.

To realize just how much words have framed social and individual issues, one only needs to look at the inflammatory language used to debate abortion, capital punishment, and gun control in the United States. The heavily loaded language used by both pro and anti proponents of these controversial topics has destroyed intelligent and sensitive discussion predictably escalating to jargon, slogans, and name-calling. Interestingly enough, both issues deal with the rights and responsibilities of individuals, and yet the common ground that the debates may share is rarely discussed.

In addition, the language used by advertisers to attract consumers and their cash provides a bountiful source of linguistic manoeuvres and acrobatics. Also not addressed here is academic jargon, long recognised as an effective tool in distancing the hoi polloi and creating a seemingly impenetrable barrier circling the ivory tower of intellectual aloofness.

Such is the power of words – and through new words our thinking is altered. In the case of *passive corruption*, we are challenged to review our private definitions of what constitutes criminal activity, a manipulation that has resulted merely from the unexpected pairing of words, and not through discussion or debate. Though *passive smoke*, *recovered memories, date rape, the unborn*, or *virtual reality,* when first introduced by the media, took some getting used to, they are now part of accepted usage. By agreeing to understand, for example, what *passive corruption* or *friendly fire* mean, we agree to believe that free will and personal responsibility for actions do not exist.

An investigation of language that does not include taking context or social relevance into account reduces the phenomenon of language to its barest skeletal framework, devoid of flesh and blood. We return again to the thesis of sociolinguists, that language, as our primary tool of communication, offers an endless coded stream of information which mysteriously and simultaneously mirrors and shapes current social dynamics and prevailing attitudes. ■

Notes

1 Suzanne Romaine, *Language in Society*, Oxford University Press, 1994 (p. 221)
2 Victor Yngve, *Linguistics in a Science*, Indiana University Press, 1986 (p. 42)
3 ibid (p. 55)
4 ibid (p. 104)
5 *The Chomsky Reader*, Pantheon Books, 1987 (p. 124)
6 *Claris Works Handbook for Macintosh*, Claris Corporation, 1994 (p. 6–7)
7 Neil Postman, *TECHNOPOLY*, Random House, 1993 (p. 8)
8 ibid (p. 114)
9 *The Daily Yomiuri*, Japan, September 20, 1996 (p. 15)

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10 ibid
11 Mary Vetterling-Braggin (Editor), *Sexist Language*, Littelfield, Adams and Co., 1981
12 Dwight Bolinger, *Language – The Loaded Weapon*, Longman, 1980 (p. 92)
13 ibid (p. 104)
14 *The Daily Yomiuri*, Japan, August 18, 1996 (p. 7, 'Something Rotten on the Riviera' by Mary Dejevsky)

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