

Orwell and the Australian Language

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Language shapes political consciousness

The words “terrorist”, “murderer” and “maniac”, may all refer to the same person, but they evoke very different images. Once those images are embedded in the public consciousness the government has a clear path to pursue a particular policy response. If killings are called “murders” the response is likely to centre on policing; if they are called “acts of terrorism” the response will most likely involve a wartime suppression of liberties.

Language, Orwell pointed out in his essay *Politics and the English Language*, is “an instrument which we shape for own purposes”. Politicians and their spin doctors know this; they use words in ways that change their meaning and they render other words meaningless. In the first category are words such as “individualism”, “choice”, “aspiration” and “trust”. In the second category are words such as “family” (now a meaningless word appearing in most policy statements), “law and order”, “rural and regional”.

Don Watson is the latest and most thorough modern critic of bureaucratic gobbledegoose – the meaningless strings of words that flow into ministerial press releases.¹ Statements like the declaration of intent from the 2000 Rural Summit:

*Establish Federal leadership and coordination to reduce hierarchical and adversarial approaches and to derive outcome-driven relationships between the three tiers of government and their agencies.*²

Laura Penny and Harry Frankfurt have written convincingly on “bullshit”, the soft lies of advertising and public relations, which shares some of the same territory as gobbledegoose.³ Orwell himself describes the systematic reconstruction of language in the Newspeak appendix of *Nineteen Eighty Four*. Newspeak abounds particularly in “Militaryspeak”, which is laden with euphemisms such as “clean bombs”, “friendly fire”, and “collateral damage”. Its civilian equivalents are terms such as “move on” (we won’t learn from our mistakes), and “mutual obligation” (it’s actually one-way – we lied about mutuality).

It is not my intention to cover this ground again – although the clear messages of Orwell, Watson and others concerned with truth always need repeating. Rather, in this article, I want to confront the “left” or “progressive” side of politics, particularly the Labor Party, and ask

¹ Don Watson *Death Sentence: The decay of public language* (Knopf 2003) and *Weasel Words, Contemporary Cant & Management Jargon* (Knopf 2004).

² Declaration #2 (statement of intent) of 2000 Rural Summit.

³ Laura Penny *Your Call is important to Us: The Truth About Bullshit* (Crown 2005), Harry G Frankfurt *On Bullshit* (Princeton 2005).

why they have allowed others to appropriate language to their own ends. They seem to lack the courage to recapture the language of power.

No longer from the “left” do we hear the crisp language of documents such as *The Communist Manifesto*, with its imagery of shackled workers struggling against oppression. (The word “struggle” appears 29 times in the English edition of the Manifesto.) Rather, we now hear from the “left” tired and limp words and phrases, and what Orwell called “dying metaphors” in his essay *Politics and the English Language*. The chant “the workers, united, will never be defeated” would have had punch whenever it was first sung out by an assembled mass of strikers who had forced the closure of a factory, but it can sound like a pathetic echo of more glorious times when it’s sung out by a group of workers who have just been defeated under the new regime of labour relations.

Having abandoned the confident, brash language of earlier times, the “left” seems to be guided by two rules of self-disempowerment. The first is to forbid the use of certain words which belong to the “right”. The other is to use selectively the language of the “right”, but only those words and phrases which have lost meaning.

The index of forbidden words

In his maiden speech to Parliament in 1974, the newly elected Member for Bennelong, John Howard, used the word “individual” ten times, and the phrase “freedom of choice” six times.

He was laying claim to these words, and seems to have been successful, for they are now on the left’s “index of forbidden words”.

Unfortunately for the “left”, terms such “individualism” and “choice” resonate positively with most people – even if their meaning isn’t entirely clear. Psychologists note that autonomy is a basic human need. A world without individualism and choice is a grey dystopia; the image of such a world is Orwell’s description of mass-produced concrete apartment blocks, where the stairwells smell of boiled cabbage.

That conflict, however, between the values of the “left” on the one hand and choice and individualism on the other is a false dichotomy; there is no incompatibility. Nugget Coombs, not aware that he may offend some with heightened sensitivities, said that only in a community could the individual develop. Oscar Wilde in his essay *The Soul of Man under Socialism* said:

...the recognition of private property has really harmed Individualism, and obscured it, by confusing a man with what he possesses. It has led Individualism entirely astray. It has made gain not growth its aim. So that man thought that the important thing was to have, and did not know that the important thing is to be. [...] With the abolition of private property, then, we shall have true, beautiful, healthy Individualism. Nobody will waste his life in accumulating things, and the symbols for things. One will live. To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all.

He's romantic about socialism – and who wasn't before 1917? But the point is that he sees "individualism" in its broadest context, dissociated from the accumulation of property. It's not about buying the BMW your neighbour cannot afford or having a Brett Whitely in your living room.

By the time Wilde was writing, the word "individualism" had already acquired another meaning, however. When he wrote *Democracy in America* in 1848 Alexis de Tocqueville identified a particularly American trait he called "individualism", "a word recently coined". His explanation is below:

I have shown how, in ages of equality, every man finds his beliefs within himself, and I shall now go on to show that all his feelings are turned in on himself.

"Individualism" is a word recently coined to express a new idea. Our fathers only knew about egoism.

Egoism is a passionate and exaggerated love of self which leads a man to think of all things in terms of himself and to prefer himself to all.

Individualism is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself.

Egoism springs from a blind instinct; individualism is based on misguided judgment rather than depraved feeling. It is due more to inadequate understanding than to perversity of heart.

Egoism sterilizes the seeds of every virtue; individualism at first only dams the spring of public virtues, but in the long run it attacks and destroys all the others too and finally merges in egoism.⁴

De Tocqueville wasn't discovering a new word; rather he was discovering a new meaning for an old word. Egoism is a rather ugly word; it wouldn't substitute neatly into Howard's maiden speech where he uses the term "individual". As Wilde said in that same essay:

It has been pointed out that one of the results of the extraordinary tyranny of authority is that words are absolutely distorted from their proper and simple meaning, and are used to express the obverse of their right signification.

Both Wilde's and De Tocqueville's meanings still exist. The Macquarie Dictionary lists six meanings of the word "Individualism":

- (1) A social theory advocating the liberty, rights, or independent action of the individual.
- (2) The principle or habit of independent thought or action.

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Alexis de Tocqueville *Democracy in America* (George Lawrence translation Doubleday 1966.)

- (3) The pursuit of individual rather than common or collective interests; egoism.
- (4) Individual character; individuality.
- (5) An individual peculiarity.
- (6) Philosophy a: the doctrine of pure egoism, or that nothing exists but the individual self. b: the doctrine that nothing is real but individual things. c: the principle that all actions are determined by, or at least exist for, the benefit of the individual.

Unless the “left” reclaims the word in its original meaning, and starts using it again with the same confidence as Wilde, it will remain the exclusive property of those who wish to promote greed and egoism as virtues. As it stands the word has a certain dog-whistle appeal: liberals hear the Wilde meaning (the first two dictionary meanings), reactionaries hear the egoism meanings.

Stan Goff, a former Special Forces Sargent in the US Army, wrote of his disillusionment when he discovered what “individualism” really meant to those who were sending soldiers off to fight for American values:

American culture is a sheep culture – long on talk about individualism, but even longer on absolute conformity. Most still believe that individuality is based on which model car you like best – commodity identity, a selection of personalities on a shelf full of products approved by the Federal Identity Administration. I’m a Taurus aspiring to be a Lexus.⁵

So too it is with the word “choice”, another word much favoured by the rugged right. To them it means choice from a limited, restricted range. We have the “choice” of a number of look-alike health insurers, but are increasingly being denied the choice of a universal tax-funded health care system. We have the “choice” of hundreds of models of cars, but only the very rich can exercise the choice of living in the inner city where they won’t need a car. Most people with limited or specialised skills have the “choice” of working in a soul-destroying job or of being unemployed.

We have the “choice” of sending our children to a private school, but when government policy is to transform our education system into a two-tier one by letting state schools run down in comparison with private schools, do parents who care about their children’s education still have the choice of a public school? Are they not being denied the option of letting their children share in the richness and diversity of the Australian community? And if they “choose” a private school, will their children suffer that same brutal pressure for conformity that Manning Clark describes as “the tyranny of opinion, the tyranny of behaviour”, enforced by the “guardians of the lore of the tribe”, as brutally and as thoroughly as by Orwell’s thought police?⁶

Drab and stifling conformity is OK – so long as it’s capitalist conformity and not socialist conformity. “Four legs good, two legs bad.”

⁵ Stan Goff *Full Spectrum Disorder: The Military in the New American Century* (Soft Skull press 2004).

⁶ Manning Clark *The Puzzles of Childhood* (Penguin 1989).

In Orwell's description of Newspeak, he refers to the way old words like "free" can still be put to use. One can say "the dog is free from lice", but any reference to its political meaning is thoughtcrime. In Australia, such a stripping of meaning is illustrated in the word "trust". In the 2004 election Labor claimed the election would be fought on the issue of trust. When John Howard showed he was relishing the idea of fighting an election on trust, the "left" was incredulous; this was the man of the "children overboard" affair, who had presided over an unprecedented period of crony capitalism. But Howard successfully redefined the word to mean "predictability" – a stolid reliability in a time of uncertainty. Trust the Howard administration to continue in its mendacity, its exploitation of the fear of terror, its celebration of mediocrity, and its crass populism. Once they had accepted that meaning, the electorate did trust Howard.

Perhaps the most absurd act of surrender by the "left" is to use the term "economic rationalism" to describe the economics of neoliberalism. When Michael Pusey brought the term out of the arcane depths of economic theory he surely had no idea how the "left" would use it so carelessly. The term has a specific meaning in economics, referring to the chain of deductive logic based on certain untested assumptions about how people behave in markets, but only academic economists are familiar with that meaning. Rather, it has become a term of derision of economics generally, with the consequence of taking the "left" out of the economic debate. To attack one's opponents by accusing them of "rationalism" is to imply that one's own political theories are irrational. (The economics of neoliberalism, in fact, are profoundly irrational, because they do not align with observed behaviour.) As Paul Keating once said, in a mocking rebuff to a critic, 'I'll tell you what I'm not, and I'm not an economic irrationalist'.⁷ To abandon economic discourse is to abandon the language of power.

The "left" must shake off its image of intellectual flakiness. The old "left" must shake off its drab Soviet-era image and the new "left" must break from its puritanical anti-materialism. John Powers has some advice for the "left":

It must reclaim pleasure. For the last 30 years, the right's been having fun – Lee Atwater playing the blues, Rush Limbaugh giving that strangulated laugh, The Weekly Standard running those mocking covers – while the left has been good for you, like eating a big, dry bowl of muesli. This isn't simply because leftists can be humorless (a quality shared with righteous evangelicals), but because, over the years, they've gone from being associated with free love and rock & roll to seeming like yuppified puritans; hence the Gore-Lieberman ticket talked about censoring video games and brainy leftist Thomas Frank tirelessly debunks the pleasure of those who buy anything Cool or find Madonna meaningful. (Clinton was an exception – he enjoyed a Big Mac and an intern as much as the hero of a beer commercial – and he was the one Democrat in recent years that most average Americans really liked.) While the left is correct in talking about the gas-guzzling horror of SUVs, it's a losing cause to tell a nation full of proud drivers that they should feel guilty about the car they love. Rather than coming off as anti-consumerist puritans in a

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Quoted on ABC Radio National *Money, Markets and the Economy* 'The Rise of Economic Rationalism' 16 November 2001.

*consumerist culture, the left should be fighting on the side of freedom and pleasure – for instance, arguing that ordinary people should have more time off from the endless hours of work that increasingly devour our souls. This is the kind of idea we should own – and force the right to argue against.*⁸

Wilde, a lover of pleasure and of socialism, who never had to sit through a Labor Party branch meeting, would have agreed.

The index of meaningless (but acceptable) words

While there are forbidden words, there are still many words the “left” feels safe to use because they have lost meaning. Every statement of policy from Labor, even if it’s about the US Trade Agreement or the depletion of Patagonian Toothfish stocks, has to have the word “family” in its noun or adjective form – even when only a quarter of Australian households are the idealised mum, dad and the kids.

Politicians let terms like “rural and regional”, “law and order”, “battlers”, “queue jumpers”, roll off their tongues, without thought. Presumably, they believe that if the “right” uses these terms, they must have some appeal.

The terms are meaningless. Does a focus on families mean politicians will neglect old people who live alone? What part of Australia isn’t part of some region? Darlinghurst and Doncaster have just as much claim to being “regional” as Dubbo and Dry Creek. “Order” can break down, but can “law” break down – does a breakdown in “law *and* order” mean that the Visigoths have trashed the law books and wiped the computer disks of their history of precedent and jurisprudence? Who are the “battlers”? Where are the queues?

These terms as used in political rhetoric are what Jaques Derrida calls “floating signifiers” – words and phrases with no connection to the things they normally signify. Rather, they are used to create mood and impressions. Commenting on the political language of postmodernism, Australian political scientist Paul Corcoran says:

*What passes for public discourse after the withdrawal of the function of communication from the sphere of linguistic performance is merely a residue of speech in forms increasingly reminiscent of the incantatory displays of oral culture. The ‘image’ and the ‘mood’ of the performance, more than content and coherence, are essential. Replaced as techniques of specialized communication, political language and rhetoric remain as archaic structures of emotional declamation or, increasingly, as a curtain of insubstantial images whose task is to veil, rather than to reveal, information about the conditions of life.*⁹

When the “left” fails to demand that those who use these terms articulate their meaning, they are making that “curtain of insubstantial images” more opaque, its patterns more out of focus.

⁸ John Powers “A Vision of Our Own: Four ideas for the left to redefine itself” LA Weekly January 21-27 2005.

⁹ Paul Corcoran, *Political Language and Rhetoric* (University of Queensland Press 1979).

When they indulge in the same drivel, the policies of the opposition become as ill-defined as those of the government. At least people have experience of the government, and when confronted with two ill-defined ideologies, it's probably reasonable for people to stick with the one they know.

Reclaiming the language

There was a time when the "left" was a champion of liberty, and of principles such as individualism and choice. Collective action and individualism were not in conflict; the vision of the Deakinite Settlement was that a decent wage achieved through collective action would liberate workers from the grey drudgery of oppressive working conditions, so that they could exercise autonomy and choice.

Australians have a tradition of direct, clear, down to earth language, free of the verbal assaults of euphemisms and gobbledegook. The "left" should not conspire in its demise.