

On the Right Word

“The whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought. In the end we shall make thought-crime literally impossible. ... Every year fewer and fewer words, and the range of consciousness always a little smaller. Even now, ...there's no reason or excuse for committing thought-crime. It's merely a question of...reality-control. ... By the year 2050, at the very latest, not a single human being will be alive who could understand such a conversation as we are having now.” — George Orwell, 1949

Since World War II, North-Americans have become increasingly sloppier and more imprecise when it comes to naming things or activities – especially as pertains to pronouncements of policies emanating from the powers that be.

Perhaps this is the result of the unregulated lexicon of the English language which allows for the manufacture of new words and expressions willy-nilly as may be distilled from popular jargon or from Madison Avenue hype. So, when nuclear physicists named new sub-atomic particles, they no longer relied on Greek or Latin for their labels but came up with colorful soda-pop sounding names. The six *quarks*, for example, were named: *up*, *down*, *charm*, *strange*, *top* (or *truth*), and *bottom* (or *beauty*).

We have become inured to the corruption of traditional concepts. Thus, now “freedom” refers to an insurance company, “love” becomes a brand of lipstick and “revolutionary” describes any new type of deodorant or depilatory cream.

Our elite economists no longer dare to use terms like “crash”, “bust” or “depression” when the stock market totally collapses. Today they employ the euphemism “market correction” in order to prevent even greater panic among investors going forward.

Going forward... That’s another new phrase we hear more and more these days; which presumably means that those flat earthers in the driver seat are progressing towards a better situation than the one we’re in. The term “going forward” implies improvement rather than the more precise “in the near future.” “Going forward” also assumes the ideological bias of Progress, forgetting that in our spherical world, going forward inevitably comes around and hits you from behind.

Sometimes this inaccuracy has had truly catastrophic consequences. When, on July 28, 1945, the Japanese Premier Kantarō Suzuki replied to the American ultimatum that a new and immensely powerful bomb was to be used on their cities unless Japan surrendered, he used the word *mokusatsu*, which President Truman’s advisors translated as “We don’t care.” However, its true meaning and nuance in classic aristocratic Japanese was “This is too contemptible for us to deal with at the present time.” The consequence of this erroneous translation was... Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

A notoriously wishy-washy term that has been in use since the 19th century is the term “terrorist.” Terrorism usually implies the willingness of an organized group to recur to violence to oppose perceived or imaginary injustices –although today there is a marked tendency to apply the term to all dissidence not tolerated by the State.

We forget that the first political use of the term “Terror” dates back to the French Revolution when *la Terreur* meant State repression and persecution of those who were suspected of opposing the revolution. It was only later that “Terror” was transmogrified to mean organized violent acts from dissident groups or from enemy nations; and those that participated in terror were labeled terrorists. The use of the label “terrorist” surfaced again in the late 19th century with the rise of Anarchist attacks against Tsarist oppression in Russia as well as in other developed countries. After the Russian Revolution the term was extended by the Western powers to all “Reds” regardless of ideological affiliation. Of course, since 9-11, the term “terrorist” is usually applied –with a few exceptions– to Islamist Jihadists.

Some of the latest chimeras of imprecision irk me to the brink of nausea. For example:

Weapons of mass destruction (WMD) –This term, first used before the first Gulf War, is so imprecise that it could justify sending troops to any country employing conventional weapons. It begs the following questions (addressed today to the Washington hawks who invented it twelve years ago) as we deconstruct its components:

- (1) What do you mean by the word “mass”? Assuming you mean a mass of people, how many individuals constitute a mass? ... 100? ...1,000? ... 10,000? If 200 persons are killed by shooting down a plane with a rocket launcher, is that an example of mass-destruction?
- (2) What do you mean by the word “weapon”? Is it advanced military technology such as nuclear devices or ICBM’s? Or can any weapon do, if it can kill the group of human beings defined as a “mass”? If an IED blows up a bus carrying 150 civilians, is that a WMD?
- (3) What do you mean by the word “destruction”? Isn’t it better to use words like “annihilation” or “extermination”? Or do we imply that we are also worried about the destruction of good property and equipment which could presumably be recycled?

So, perhaps a more accurate term would have been “Advanced Military Technology capable of Mass Extermination of Human Beings” (or AMTeMEH for short) –where a mass is perhaps defined as 10,000 or more casualties in a very short period of time. Only a dozen or so countries today are capable of deploying AMTeMEH’s.

A more recent example of imprecision in language comes from the propaganda surrounding the on-going war in Syria and Iraq. The American-led coalition has vowed to “degrade” ISIL. This euphemism simply hides the strategy of bombing cities, oil wells or factories that can produce economic or military resources supporting the rogue “terrorist” army.

The right word for the right concept. The French have a phrase for it: *Le mot juste*. Will we ever again be capable of returning to the use of the right word for the right concept? I sincerely doubt it. We are already living in the world of Orwellian Newspeak.