

# Doublespeak and Deception:

## Language as a Weapon for Social and Political Control

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### **Introduction.**

Language is a tool for communicating and cooperating, for informing people about the world around them and their role in it (Clark, 1996). In order to be useful and efficient, language must be less than fully explicit; it must rely on the shared common ground of the speakers (e.g. expectation of shared knowledge and experiences), the understood roles and goals of the joint activities taking place during a conversation (e.g. what the participants are trying to accomplish by speaking to each other), and the working assumption that the communicators are trying to be correctly understood. Such implicit features of language are essential to its utility in everyday use, and are rarely considered consciously by speakers, since most language use is cooperative in nature. However these same conventions and mechanisms can be exploited to confuse, mislead, and deceive people into thinking and acting in ways that are harmful to themselves.

George Orwell recognized all too well this potential for language as a weapon. In his famous essay, "Politics and the English Language," Orwell observed that the "great enemy of clear language is insincerity" (Orwell, 1946). In other words, language is designed to communicate true ideas and honest intentions, but it can be misused when the speaker is trying to be deceptive. In his subsequent novel, *1984*, Orwell describes a totalitarian government whose primary source of power and control over its citizens is the use of language to limit rebellious thoughts and obscure the hypocrisy of the state (Orwell, 1949). For example, the government trains its citizens to throw away loose paper,

notes, or books found into special “memory holes,” which are really tubes that lead to incinerators. This is a clear example of what Orwell terms *doublespeak*: language designed to disguise, suppress, and undermine people’s knowledge of reality (the primary branch of government responsible for doublespeak in *1984* was fittingly titled the *Ministry of Truth*). Orwell’s primary thesis was that the words we use influence more than just how we talk—they influence how we think, and the clarity of our thought is bounded by the clarity of our language.

While the world of *1984* is fiction, the fundamental observations made by Orwell are firmly rooted in reality. Scholars like Professor William Lutz of Rutgers have traced examples of doublespeak to as far back as ancient Greece, and have extensively documented the continuing use of doublespeak in contemporary society, from the government, the military, corporations, and elsewhere (Lutz, 1989). Lutz gives examples ranging from Regan’s “revenue enhancement” (a proposed tax hike) and the Penatgon’s “incontinent ordinance” (bombs that hit civilian targets by mistake) to terms like “pre-owned” cars (used cars) and “automotive internists” (auto mechanics).

Lutz, in addition to being undoubtedly one of the most outspoken critics of doublespeak and its proliferation (he has written several books on doublespeak, and he edits the *Quarterly Reivew of Doublespeak*), gives one of the broadest definitions of the term. According to Lutz, “doublespeak is language designed to evade responsibility, make the unpleasant appear pleasant, the unattractive appear attractive. Basically, it's language that pretends to communicate, but really doesn't. It is language designed to mislead, while pretending not to.” Essentially, Lutz’s contention is that any use of language designed to put a better face on something than may be warranted constitutes

doublespeak. In fact, he goes so far as to say that answering the question, “who is saying what to whom, under what conditions and circumstances, with what intent, and with what results?” is a sufficient diagnostic for determining if a given piece of language is legitimate or doublespeak.

I find Lutz’s definition of doublespeak to be too all encompassing to be useful. While he makes the important observation that the *intent* and the *results* of language use are important clues to discovering doublespeak, he concludes that any misleading speech, from simple advertising to a mass government conspiracy, is of the same ilk and should be eliminated altogether. I contend in contrast that there is a broad spectrum of arenas in which language is used without the full intent of honesty, and that these arenas can be distinguished in kind and severity by the manner and context in which they occur, by the intentions of the speakers, by the importance of the misrepresented information to the goals of the addressee, and by the canonical effects this misrepresentation has.

In support of this view, I will compare and contrast doublespeak with a variety of similar but less severe arenas in which language is used to mislead: advertising, euphemism, and ostensible speech. This analysis will leave us with a more narrow and targeted definition of doublespeak. I will then investigate how and why doublespeak is an effective tool for deception, by looking at cognitive, linguistic, social, and legal evidence of the effect that the use of doublespeak has, and the way that society deals with it. I will conclude with a discussion of what makes doublespeak truly *deceptive* and not just misleading, by considering the nature of deception itself, and the way in which doublespeak relates. The goal of this paper is twofold: to motivate a restriction in the application of the term *doublespeak* to a specific subset of misleading language that is

overtly deceptive; and to gain a deeper understanding of the mechanism by which doublespeak achieves what Orwell eloquently described as its goal: “to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.”

### **Doublespeak vs. Advertising.**

The job of advertisers is to put the best face possible on the products they are selling. Thus it is common to see ads that depict their product being used in a setting not entirely consistent with reality, from housewives smiling as they clean their ovens with a new “miracle cleaner” to ex-frat-boys drinking cheap beer while surrounded by supermodels (Geis, 1982). This basic motivation to paint a pretty picture leads to misrepresentations that vary in severity. The majority of instances in which language is used to mislead in advertising are fairly benign: exaggeration, vagueness, and implied claims that can’t be stated explicitly are all common.

There are well-established legal boundaries regulating the nature and the extremity of claims that advertisers can make, and the research data necessary to defend such claims. For example, in 1997, the Federal Trade Commission forced SlimAmerica, Inc. to stop all business practices when it discovered that the company was using false claims to sell its diet product “Super-Formula” (Advertising Law News, 1997). The FTC found that while SlimAmerica’s advertisements claimed that Super-Formula diet pills used new medical breakthroughs backed by clinical studies to offer dramatic short-term weight loss, in fact no such studies had been conducted, and the effectiveness of the pills were dubious at best. Furthermore, the ads cited an endorsement by Howard Retzer, M.D., of The Research Institute of Metabolism and Nutrition, but upon investigation it

was found that no such person or institute existed. As a result, SlimAmerica was forced to stop all of its advertising, and its assets were frozen. This type of legal action keeps most advertisers contained to making more modest, defensible claims that they otherwise might.

Consumers are also generally skeptical of advertising as a medium of communication, because the motivation of advertisers to sell their products at all costs is well understood. While this level understanding is not as developed as in the cases of euphemism and ostensible speech that we will investigate later, it does undermine the power of advertisers to deceive consumers, because in many cases they are aware that in this arena, a cooperative exchange of information is not the primary goal. Of course this is not to say that consumers are never fooled by advertisements, but rather that the linguistic context of ads stems their deceptive capabilities.

While Lutz agrees that benign exaggerations made by advertisers don't always constitute doublespeak, he nevertheless fails to draw a meaningful distinction between what he feels are harmless and harmful uses of language in this context. I believe that the fundamental differences between conventional advertising and doublespeak are the earnestness with which claims are made, the importance of the misrepresented information, and the consequences of the dishonesty. Covering up the unpleasantness of cleaning one's toilet by paying actors to smile as they do it is far less significant than covering up the unpleasantness of bombing civilians in Kosovo by calling it a "humanitarian intervention", as NATO frequently did (Herman, 2001). People have experience dealing with toilets, so they are educated enough to spot dishonesty there, but most civilians have no experience with foreign military affairs, so they have little

personal grounds for disbelief. Furthermore there is a general informality recognized with depictions of household chores, while military briefings are always intentionally formal and official. In short, there is a large difference in the knowledge and expectations of people when dealing with ads than with dealing with doublespeak, and in the later case, the stakes are usually much higher.

Finally, if you are suspicious of the claims made by an advertiser, you are free to simply not buy the product. If you are suspicious of the claims made by a military general, there is little you can do to “opt out” of the situation. There are numerous consumer reports published that provide unbiased information about products for consumers that want to know the truth. There are very few publications that can tell you what’s really happening with current military operations. Legal practices like the “bespeaks caution” doctrine provide requirements and incentives for companies to include warnings about possible misrepresentation and/or omission in their product statements and advertisements (ALR, 1996). The government is subject to no such regulations, nor would they be practically enforceable. Thus, we see that advertising and doublespeak, while both situations in which language is used to mislead, are of a fundamentally different character.

### **Doublespeak vs. Euphemism.**

Euphemisms are a linguistic tool for avoiding unpleasantness. For example, it is common to avoid talking about death by using the euphemism that someone “has passed away.” Euphemisms are often used as a sign of respect or politeness, or to refer to difficult or taboo matters without loss of face, and thus they have a widely applicable and

practical use in society (Allan, 1991). Since doublespeak also has a quality of making unpleasant matters seem positive or at least inoffensive, the terms *euphemism* and *doublespeak* are often used interchangeably. This association is strengthened by the observation that euphemism and doublespeak achieve their functions via similar linguistic devices like vagueness and associations with more pleasant topics. For example, it is common to say that someone is “indisposed” when they are in the bathroom, or to say that “aunt Jane is visiting” when a woman is menstruating. At first glance, this may seem very similar to referring to a plane crash as an “involuntary conversion” or referring to a military overthrow of a foreign government as the “liberation” of the country. However there are two critical differences between euphemism and doublespeak: euphemistic terms are widely and conventionally understood to have meanings other than the literal words used, and the reality that euphemism covers up is something with which people all have experience. In contrast, doublespeak is expected to be taken at face value, and it deals with events outside the experience of most people.

This point may seem obvious, but it is of central importance to distinguishing doublespeak from other forms of misleading language use. Euphemisms, while certainly examples of language used to avoid sensitive issues by wrapping them in pleasant or abstract language, are primarily not deceptive in nature, because everyone knows what is really meant when a euphemism is used. This is not just an arbitrary property of euphemisms; it is the thing that makes them useful. Painful subjects, while hard to talk about, often need to be discussed, so languages have constructed vocabularies that can accomplish this task in a respectful manner, but these euphemistic words need to convey

the same meaning and the words they are being substituted for, because otherwise they would be useless for communication. Thus, euphemisms can be seen as having a multi-layered meaning: at the most basic (literal) level, they are diversionary and misleading because they use sanitized, abstract, and vague words to avoid the harsh aspects of reality; but at a higher (pragmatic) level, they are straightforward terms used for honest and clear communication about difficult subjects, with the added semantic ingredient of respect.

The difference is that doublespeak doesn't share this higher level of meaning. By resorting to technical jargon and other unfamiliar terms, doublespeak seeks to evade any understanding of what is *really* being conveyed. The goal of doublespeak is not to respectfully deal with difficult issues, but rather to not deal with them at all. By using the same linguistic techniques that euphemism does to make terms sound positive, reasonable, or otherwise un-alarming (we will investigate the specifics of these techniques later), doublespeak succeeds in removing the emotional response that would normally be associated with the topics being discussed. Unlike with euphemisms however, its role stops there, so no real information ends up being communicated, other than that there is nothing to worry about. It may seem odd that people would try to talk and yet say nothing of content, but when informing the public about military actions or a serious product defect, the primary content that is intended to be conveyed is precisely "don't worry about it." So doublespeak *is* communicating, it's just not telling you what you wanted to know.



### **Doublespeak vs. Ostensible Speech.**

If euphemisms reveal that honest communication can involve a departure from reality, ostensible speech pushes this notion to the limit. Ostensible invitations are polite offerings that are never intended to be taken seriously. For example, in the common exchange, “How are you?” “Just fine thanks,” it is socially understood that the first speaker doesn’t *actually* want to know how the second speaker is doing, and that the second speaker’s response isn’t *actually* reflective the current state of affairs (Isaacs, 1990). This type of language use is more of a formality or a preface than a genuine information exchange. Yet when viewing such an exchange objectively, it may appear deceptive to say that you’re fine if in reality you’re not. There are more extreme examples of ostensible speech that, to an outside observer, may sound very misleading if not downright deceptive. For example, when asked how his flowers sold at the market, a speaker of Tzotzil (a central American language) will often respond by saying “they sold a little bit” or even “they didn’t sell at all” when in fact he sold all or most of his inventory (Haviland, 1998).

This sounds like a blatant misstatement of reality, but no one versed in the local culture would be misled. Like in the case of euphemisms, ostensible speech relies on a shared understanding of what is *meant* by an exchange and not just what is said. Ostensible speech doesn’t work if you don’t know that it’s ostensible, just like euphemisms don’t work if you don’t know what is being euphemized. We all have friends that fail to discount the literal meaning of ostensible invitations (for example they treat an ostensible invitation to come along to a movie as a genuine invite), and this is

usually humorous and/or annoying, but it also illustrates the common ground that is essential to make ostensible speech useful for its intended purpose.

The term *ostensible speech* can also be extended include other “non-serious” uses of language such as sarcasm, teasing, and facetiousness. In all of these cases, language is used to convey statements that are not literally consistent with reality. For example, if I say “I *so* enjoy waiting for an hour whenever I want to get service at the post office,” I am making a false statement, because I actually don’t enjoy it at all. Despite this misrepresentation, there is no deception, because I convey by the tone of my voice that I am not being serious, and it is otherwise easily inferable from the situation that the conviction I am asserting is not genuine.

I often make sarcastic remarks without using a sarcastic tone of voice for humor value, and it often confuses people, at least temporarily, even when I’m making statements that they know perfectly well are not true. If I were speaking about subject with which they were unfamiliar, they would likely mistake my comment as honest, yet this is exactly the environment in which doublespeak is delivered. The CEO doesn’t sneer when he says his company is “optimizing the team” (massive layoffs), and if you don’t already know what he’s talking about, it’s difficult to infer. Again this is not to say that one can never decipher doublespeak or that no one as any experience in the matters doublespeak deals with, but the arena in which doublespeak is most commonly used is characterized by an honest delivery of information about which little is known, and this is one major factor that gives doublespeak its strength and that differentiates it from other uses of non-literal or otherwise misleading language.

## **How and Why Doublespeak Works.**

Having compared doublespeak to advertising, euphemism, and ostensible speech, we have isolated a few features in which it is unique: there is an intent to be misleading about important issues, there is little understanding of what is meant by what is said, and there is little external context or convention from which to decipher the true meaning of doublespeak. These features all contribute to the deceptive potential of doublespeak, but there is still another important question: what's in a name? For example, when the US Government was asked to explain why it had conducted unauthorized bombings in Cambodia in 1974, an Air Force press officer declared the mission was simply "air support" (Johnson, 1982). This label effectively legitimized the illegal operations, despite the fact that the truth of what was going on was already well known. In other words, the words themselves put a positive spin on the events, and this spin was apparently enough to condone actions that had been explicitly forbidden, and for which no serious explanation was put forth.

This type of example suggests that the words use to describe an event or concept can set the *perspective* from which it is viewed, and this can affect its legitimacy and acceptance. The connotations, associations, and canonical images that come with words apparently exert influence on the subjective characterization of the concepts they are used to describe. This could explain another dimension of why doublespeak is so effective, but it needs empirical evidence to back it up.

In 1991, Charles Gruner and colleagues at the University of Georgia conducted a study of the effectiveness of doublespeak by using the semantic analysis technique known as *semantic differential*, which quantifies the different facets of meanings and

their relative strength and importance to explain the differences in meanings between different words (Gruner, 1991). This technique is widely used in modern general semantics, but at the time of this study, no one had systematically tested whether these semantic differences showed up when contrasting unfavorable terms to their doublespeak counterparts. The study looked at four pairs of terms: Lawyer vs. Attorney; US. War Department (1779-1947) vs. US Department of Defense; TV rerun vs. encore telecast; and higher taxes vs. governmental revenue enhancement. Students rated these terms on nine semantic differential scales, covering the *evaluation*, *activity*, and *potency* axes of meaning normally associated with this type of analysis.

The results of the study showed significant differences between the semantic assessments of the later three pairs of terms, though attorney and lawyer were found to have little semantic differential (which is reasonable since *attorney* is hardly doublespeak). *Department of Defense* was consistently rated higher on semantic scales of “goodness,” “size,” and “activity” than *Department of War*. *Encore telecast* was significantly favored to *rerun*. And *revenue enhancement* beat *higher taxes* across the board. The findings suggested that using doublespeak terms did indeed produce a noticeable difference in the attitudes and acceptance of the terms over their “real-world” counterparts. Gruner concludes his paper with the following warning: “it seems that this study upholds the belief that those who wish to can manipulate meaning to their advantage. We should encourage more work of the kind represented here and also support education on the insidious nature of doublespeak”

There are other studies that also reveal the potency of connotations derived from the choice of words used to describe a topic. For example, Raymond Mejeres examined

the differences between using the terms *youth*, *adolescent*, and *teenager* to refer to people between the ages of 12 to 20 (Majeres, 1976). These terms are all well known, everyone has had extensive experience with people in this age bracket, and the terms all refer to the same thing. Nevertheless, a semantic differential analysis revealed significant differences in the semantic classification of these different terms. For example, *youth* was consistently seen as more positive than *teenager* or *adolescent*, and *adolescent* was seen as the least understandable of the terms. This study reveals that even among familiar concepts, different terms for the same thing evoke different responses in attitude and connotation. This research further supports the claim that there is real power in the actual words of doublespeak as well as the context in which doublespeak occurs.

The primacy of associations to word meaning is well known by scholars working in lexical semantics. Miller and Fellbaum of Princeton University have constructed a large online database of word meanings, and the data structure they found to be most successful at capturing meaning was a relational semantic network (as opposed to a per-word componential analysis for example) (Miller, 1991). In fact they go so far as to say “the fundamental semantic relation is synonymy, which is required to define the lexicalized concepts that words can be used to express.” In other words, the most important feature for determining what a word means is what other words it’s related to. This may explain why “peace keeper” is so much preferred to “war fighter,” because “peace” is synonymous with “harmony,” “happiness,” and “tranquility,” while war is synonymous with “combat,” “battle,” and “death.” It may also explain why vague, abstract, and technical terms evoke less of a response than more basic terms for the same concept, and why virtually all government programs are named with generally positive

sounding words, such as *social security*, *affirmative action*, and so on. One effect of doublespeak that gives it power seems to be the redirection from negative to positive “semantic clusters,” a hypothesis that further explains the importance of the connotations that different words have.

There is evidence for this from the “other side of the fence” as well, where terms are dropped because of the negative connotations they carry. One reason the term “race” was dropped in favor of “ethnic group” was the close association between “race” and “racism.” A similar story follows the switch from “sex” to “gender.” The California Prune Board recently changed its name to “The California Dried Plum Board” and launched a campaign to change the name of the product it represents, out of fear that the term “prune” had the negative stereotype of “a medicinal food for [old people], rather than a healthful, nutritious food for women, who are leading an active lifestyle” (Safire, ??). This may sound like an odd use of time and money, but apparently people are more willing to buy “dried plums” than “prunes,” even when they know they’re getting the same thing. As A.P. farm reporter Phillip Brasher wrote, “prunes by any other name would taste the same, but they might sell better.”

During the late nineties, in an attempt to gain more public support for the repeal of the estate tax, republicans began calling it the “death tax”, because they felt that while the term “estate tax” sounded like it applied only to the wealthy few who could afford “estates,” the term “death tax” would arouse more indignation, because everybody dies, and what gives the government the right to tax someone for dying? During the 2000 campaign, Bush’s canonical example of someone who would benefit from the repeal of the death tax was a farmer or a working man (Klott, 2000). In reality, the estate tax only

applies to individuals who have assets near to one million dollars, so most working class citizens would not be affected by the tax's repeal. But this is a wonderful example of politicians deciding to give up a euphemistic term they created when its connotations no longer suited their interests.

In summary, despite what our intuitions about human objectivity and rationality may be, there is a preponderance of evidence that suggests the words used to describe a topic greatly affect the light in which that topic is viewed, even when it is a familiar subject. The importance of word choice has to do with the connotations and associations that come with different words, because synonymy is a primary constituent of word meaning. This makes it easier to understand why, in addition to dealing with unfamiliar subjects with an earnest appearance of communication, doublespeak has the power to make unpleasant or outrageous events seem acceptable. By picking terms with positive connotations and synonyms, doublespeak casts a favorable light on the topics to which it refers, and avoids the painful images and associations that would otherwise be present if realistic terms were used instead.

### **Doublespeak and Deception.**

We have seen how the linguistic arena in which doublespeak occurs and the words that doublespeak chooses serve to effectively mislead the public. By using terms with positive connotations to refer to situations with which people have little first-hand experience, doublespeak successfully convinces them to think favorably (or at least not unfavorably) about topics with which, if they were given suitable unbiased knowledge,

they would become very indignant. The question remains, is this practice deceptive? In order to reply, we must first consider what it means to be deceptive.

Deception is a difficult concept to define, because its borders are fuzzy, and depend on your point of view. The difference between merely misleading and deliberately deceiving seems to largely be a function of malice of forethought, and a material result. If I unintentionally give you false information (for example if I really believed it was factual), that can hardly be called deception, though it is still misleading. It may be misleading to portray beer drinkers in advertisements as suddenly more attractive when they open the bottle, or housewives as cheerful when they clean their oven with *brand x*, but this type of misinformation is not critical to consumers' abilities to learn about products, because the decision to buy comes from more a more fundamental assessment of a product's capabilities, which are not overtly false in most ads. In cases where false claims of a material nature are made (e.g. in the case of SlimAmerica's Super-Formula), this deception is quickly stopped with legal action.

In her book Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life, Sissela Bok remarks that in order to investigate the morality of deception, "we must single out...from the countless ways in which we blunder misinformed through life, that which is done with the *intention to mislead*" (italics are hers) (Bok, 1999). She goes on to define the activity of deception as when "we communicate messages meant to mislead [others], meant to make them believe what we ourselves do not believe." The important message here is that deception occurs when speakers personally believe something, but intentionally convince their addressees of a contradictory version of reality, with the goal of affecting and controlling their thoughts and behaviors as a result. The American Heritage



Dictionary agrees with this assessment of deception, defining the word to mean “to lead another into error, danger, or a disadvantageous position, for the most part by underhand means. *Deceive* involves the deliberate concealment or the misrepresentation of the truth” (Houghton Mifflin, 1996).

Viewing deception in this light, it is clear that doublespeak is indeed a prototypical example of deceptive behavior. When the military had to report on its actions in Kosovo, it surely knew that saying “we indiscriminately bombed and killed numerous civilians in an attempt to force the underpowered Serbian army into submission” would arouse massive public indignation and uproar, which might prevent the mission from continuing. To avoid this undesirable outcome, the military chose to refer to the events as a “humanitarian intervention,” presumably because they believed the public would associate the term *humanitarian* with promoting social good in a peaceful and constructive fashion. Furthermore, the terms are sufficiently general that it would be hard for an average civilian to figure out what was really going on, so there was an element of camouflage as well as misdirection. The result of this use of doublespeak was a widespread public acceptance of actions that would have been met with hostility if an unbiased account had been given. Thus the military deliberately led the public to believe an assessment of the situation that they themselves did not believe. This is exactly the definition of deception that I have given, and the severity the events being covered up coupled with the inability of the public to discover the truth only makes the act more shocking. The military may well have believed that deceiving the public was in everyone’s “best interest,” so that they can continue to “do their duty,” but that certainly doesn’t make the act itself any less deceptive.

## **Conclusion.**

Doublespeak, when narrowly defined as the use of vague, technical, or positive language to convince people that a given topic or event is acceptable, when they would think otherwise if given first-hand data, in order to control public opinion, avoid responsibility, and obscure reality, is deception in the first degree. It is exactly the exploitation of language by insincerity that Orwell complained about. Language can be used to mislead in a variety of manners, and not all misleading uses of language constitute deception. However, it is the primary aim of doublespeak to deceive.

Empirical evidence of the effectiveness of doublespeak, besides its constant widespread use, has been presented from a cognitive, linguistic, and legal standpoint, and the results are the same: the words you use to describe a topic greatly affect the perspective from which it is viewed as well as the connotations that get drawn, and this can make the negative seem positive, the insignificant seem important, and the unthinkable seem reasonable. Doublespeak works because it takes advantage of the inherent implicitness of meaning conveyed through language use, and the fact that normal language use is fundamentally cooperative, and exploits these principles to do just the opposite: to appear like honest communication while actually saying nothing, and to appear to present an objective labeling of an event or topic, while actually coloring it significantly. While I do not agree with Lutz's broad definition of doublespeak, I do agree with his conclusion that, "if we really believe that we understand such language and that such language communicates and promotes clear thought, then the world of *1984*, with its control of reality through language, is upon us."

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