Language and the Interpretation of Reality

Although we use language to interpret the world around us, we are limited in our interpretation by our language. Language is not a neutral instrument that we use to interpret the world impersonally and objectively. Language by its very nature is biased. This theory of how language affects the way we see the world was first advanced by the American anthropologist and linguist Edward Sapir in 1929 and later refined by his student Benjamin Lee Whorf. Their theory was called the Sapir-Whorf theory, and later just the Whorf theory.

The Sapir-Whorf Theory

Sapir stated the "weak" version of this theory this way:

> Language is a guide to "social reality." . . . Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. . . . The fact of the matter is that the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached. . . . We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.[1]

In a later article, Sapir argued that meanings are "not so much discovered in experience as imposed upon it, because of the tyrannical hold that linguistic form has upon our orientation in the world."[2]

Through a series of studies, principally of Native American languages, Benjamin Lee Whorf, Sapir's sometime graduate

student at Yale, refined Sapir's thesis into what has been called the "strong" version of the theory. In 1940, Whorf argued that each language conveys to its users a ready-made worldview. "Every language . . . incorporates certain points of view and certain patterned resistances to widely divergent points of view."[3] Whorf then adds:

> . . . language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade. . . . We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language. The categories and types we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds–and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way–an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, *but its terms are absolutely obligatory*; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classifica-

> tion of data which the agreement decrees. . . . We are thus introduced to a new theory of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated.[4]

Unfortunately, critics have distorted Whorf's theory by describing his explanation as "everything is relative," thus making it impossible for anyone to learn a foreign language or to translate from one language to another. Since we can both learn another language and translate other languages, Whorf's theory is simply wrong, they conclude.

However, Whorf never made such a claim. His theory claims only that language predisposes us to certain ways of experiencing. As Walter Lippmann noted, "For the most part we do not first see, and then define, *we define and then we see*."[5] Whorf's theory is not that language determines what we can think but that language influences what we routinely think. The language we use influences the way we categorize our experiences. Using our language is so natural, so common, so essential that we use it quite unaware of how it affects the way we perceive and make meaning. This does not mean that we cannot engage in nonroutine thinking, only that the established habits of our language both guide and promote the ways we typically perceive, think, and act.

We tend to think in either-or terms, asking is that good (as opposed to bad), is she attractive (as opposed to unattractive), is it difficult (as opposed to easy), and so on. Our language encourages us to talk about the world in terms of polarities, or opposites, and not in terms of a stream of alternatives. Thus we find ourselves debating such questions as: "Are taxes too high?" "Should we spend more on defense?" "Should Medicare be reduced?" "Is the Social Security fund bankrupt?" These questions require us to take a position; they do not encourage us to give a considered response that discusses the complexity and uncertainties of the issue. This "either-or-ness" of our language dominates our public discourse.

Then there are the words we have available for labeling things. Consider, for example, family relationships. We don't give much thought to the words we use for the members of our family. We have the words "uncle" and "aunt" to distinguish between a male and female relative that stands in the same relation to us, while we have just the word "cousin" for a relative who could be either male or female. What if we had separate words for male cousin and female cousin? What if instead of just the words "aunt" and "uncle" we had specific words to identify the aunt on the mother's side of the family as opposed to the aunt on the father's side? And what if we had words that distinguished between older and younger brothers and sisters? Of course, we could go on with any number of other classifications, and create words for each new classification of relatives. But we see our family relationships in certain categories because our language predisposes us to classify our family relationships in these ways. While we can step outside these terms if we need to (my female cousin on my father's side), our language doesn't pro-

vide us with a ready word to express a different classification.

Consider, however, the use of pronouns in Japanese. When speaking English, we use the same pronouns when addressing anyone. Our pronoun system doesn't make distinctions. However, in Japanese every pronoun includes an explicit declaration of where the speaker stands on the social scale in relation to the person to whom the speaker is talking. English speakers, who never gave any thought to a pronoun carrying such meaning, usually struggle with this pronoun system when learning Japanese.

Relativity and Language

We may find Whorf's theory attractive because it is very much in tune with the fundamental scientific revolution of the twentieth century: the theory of relativity. Einstein said that how we see the phenomena of the universe is relative to our point of observation. Whorf said that our worldview is relative to the language we use. For Werner Heisenberg, distortion inheres in the very act of expressing an idea: "what we observe is not nature itself but nature exposed to our method of questioning."[6]

A famous study looked at just how our point of observation affects the world we see and experience. In the study, researchers examined the reactions to a football game played between Dartmouth and Princeton. Suffice it to say that the

game was very rough, prompting numerous articles about how "dirty" the game had been. But what caught the attention of the researchers was the totally opposite views of the game held by each side: Dartmouth supporters charged the Princeton players with deliberately setting out to terrorize the Dartmouth players, while Princeton supporters made the same charge against the Dartmouth team.

The researchers showed a film of the game to a carefully selected sample of students from each college who had not attended the game, then had them complete detailed questionnaires on the game and on their own backgrounds. Analyzing this information, the researchers concluded that

> . . . there is no such "thing" as a "game" existing "out there" in its own right which people merely "observe." The "game" "exists" for a person and is experienced by him only in so far as certain happenings have significances in terms of his purpose. Out of all the occurrences going on in the environment, a person selects those that have some significance for him from his own egocentric position in the total matrix.[7]

The students from Dartmouth "saw" the Princeton players engaging in unnecessary rough play, while the students from Princeton "saw" the opposite. Those two groups of students experienced different football games.

These results aren't all that surprising. There is a large body of research that all arrives at the same conclusion: Our

global evaluation, that is, our overall evaluation, of our experiences is never objective but is influenced by a variety of factors, most of which we are unaware of. As two researchers conclude: "The protestations of even the most virtuous and disinterested participants that they are capable of independent judgments should be considered suspect."[8]

Our Language and Our World

Each of us experiences the world in our own way, from our own point of observation, and for each of us the language we use reflects our perception of the world as we experience it. Our language reveals to others not the world as it "is" but as we see it, and how we experience it as individuals. I can call my coffee hot while my wife finds it scalding. The critic finds the movie boring and clichéd while I find it funny and different. For some, it's "aid to dependent children," while to others it's "welfare." I may complain about the billions of dollars in "corporate welfare" that others call "subsidies" or "tax incentives." The words we use create the world in which we live, and with words we tell others what the world is as we experience it.

The National Cattlemen's Association understood this power of language when it advised its members to send a more positive image to the public by replacing some common terms with newer, more self-enhancing terms. At a time

when the public is so very health-conscious, advises their newsletter, avoid a term such as "fat cattle." Better instead to refer to "market ready" cattle. Growth hormones and other chemical additives should not be mentioned. Instead, refer to "promotants," and don't say "doctor the cattle" when "provide medical care" promotes a much better image. Other changes include replacing "stockyard" with "livestock market," "operation" with "farm" or "ranch," "operator" with "cattleman" or "cattle producer," and "facility" with "barn." Finally, never mention slaughtering cattle. Better to say "process" or "go to market."[9]

Signs and Symbols

Before we go any further, we need to clarify the important difference between signs and symbols. Too often we confuse the two terms, especially when we consider the symbolic function of language.

While both signs and symbols communicate information, there are crucial differences between them. As we use the term here, a sign has a natural or intrinsic connection to that which it signifies. We usually take smoke to be a sign of fire, just as thunder is considered a sign of rain and a fever is taken as a sign of illness. Leave your fingerprints all over the gun and the police will take it as a sign that you handled it. In these instances there is a connection between the sign and

the information the sign communicates. After all, smoke doesn't usually just appear out of nowhere, thunder doesn't come rumbling across the sky on a bright, sunny day, healthy people usually don't have a fever, and guns don't pick up fingerprints without being touched. So signs and what they signify–their meanings–are connected.

However, there is no intrinsic or natural connection between the symbol and that for which it stands. The relationship between the symbol and its meaning is purely arbitrary. What any symbol stands for is determined by the people who use it. A red light means stop only because we have decided that's what a red light means. There is nothing inherent in the color red that means stop. "Old Glory" is a symbol of the United States, yet there were many competitors for the honor of being a symbol of the United States.

Every Fourth of July my wife and I display two flags: one is the flag of the thirteen colonies, with thirteen stars in a circle, while the other has a coiled rattlesnake and the words "Don't tread on me" embroidered in big letters. Both were symbols of this country. Both were carried into battle during the Revolutionary War. There were many other flags that at one time were symbols of this country. But there was no intrinsic connection between any of those flags and what they stood for. In fact, each Fourth of July I have to explain to people what the rattlesnake flag stands for because they've never seen it and don't know its meaning.

Money is perhaps one of the most common symbols, and like any other symbol it has meaning only because of our

agreement to accept it as a symbol of value. There is nothing inherent in money that gives it value. Here's a short tale to illustrate the inherent value of money, as told to me by an uncle who remembers the time he thought he was very rich.

During the battle for Manila in 1944, artillery fire destroyed a bank building, including its vault, showering the area with money. My uncle, who was one of the many American soldiers fighting near the bank, described his joy as the sky was filled with clouds of fluttering bills. But as he and other soldiers gathered up all the bills they could, their joy quickly turned to disappointment. The bills were Japanese occupation money, so the soldiers used it to make fires for heating their coffee. With the end of the Japanese occupation of the Philippines, the social agreement that gave that money value ceased to exist.

There is another difference between signs and symbols. Signs have a one-to-one relationship with their meaning while symbols can have multiple meanings. We usually don't plan a picnic when we hear thunder rumbling across the sky, nor do we pronounce fit and healthy someone who has a temperature of 102 degrees. But ask people what the American flag symbolizes, what it means, and you'll get a lot of answers, all of them correct. The flag means America, freedom, the bravery of the men and women who fought and died to defend America, all the American virtues that any particular person finds important. And the list goes on. In other words, the flag means different things to different people. As a symbol, it has multiple meanings, not just one meaning.

Words Are Symbols

Words are symbols, not signs. There is no natural, intrinsic connection between the word and what it stands for, what it means, what we call its referent. A spade is not a spade unless we decide to call it a spade. "Pig" does not mean pig because pigs are such dirty animals. Nor does a word like "spit" mean what it does because of how it sounds, otherwise what can we say about "ho*spit*able?" Nor is there a "right" word for everything. Pigs are not called "pigs" because that's what they are and that's the only word for them. "Terrorists" are called "terrorists" not because that's what they are but because someone has decided to call them that.

Since words are symbols not signs, words can and do have more than one meaning. In fact, the 500 most frequently used words in the English language have more than 14,000 meanings. A quick look at my desk dictionary reveals that the verb "fix" has twenty-two meanings listed, the verb "see" thirty-three meanings, the noun "light" eighteen meanings, the noun "night" twelve meanings, and the noun "ship" five meanings. In an unabridged dictionary many more meanings are listed for each of these words.

If words had only one meaning, we could pretty well eliminate all ambiguity from the language. However, since each word in a sentence can have multiple meanings, we must sort out all those possible meanings to arrive at the one meaning that we think works. We do this every time we use

language, and usually we're not even aware we're doing it.

Often, we have to puzzle the meaning out of a group of words. What does the following telegram mean? "SHIP SAILS TODAY." If you're expecting friends to return from a Caribbean cruise, you might head for the docks to greet them when their ship arrives. But if you're in the business of making sails for sailboats, you might fill the order and ship some new sails to the customer. Without context, we might not know what the words mean. We often run into this problem with newspaper headlines. "Smith Gets Probation in Guitar Case" requires a context to convey the message.

Changing the Meaning of Symbols

Human beings love symbols. Making symbols is one of the things we do best, and we are constantly doing it. In addition to verbal symbols, or words, we're continually creating nonverbal symbols. And just to make the whole symbol-making process even more interesting, we often change the meaning of symbols.

Some years ago, a deep, golden suntan was a symbol of outdoor labor such as farming or construction work, and thus a symbol of what some people considered a lower social status. So people who saw themselves as being of a higher social class–meaning they either had the kind of job that allowed them to stay inside and out of the sun or they had

so much money that they didn't have to work at all–worked hard to keep their skin pale. Today, however, the deep tan that once symbolized work is prized as the symbol of those who have the time and money to get away to places like the Bahamas and lie in the sun getting their skin as tan as possible. It will be interesting to see what happens to the meaning of this symbol as we become more and more concerned with skin cancer, which is caused by too much exposure to the sun. Time to change the meaning of the symbol?

We live in a world of symbols. By simply agreeing to what a symbol means, any two of us can create a new symbol. And unless someone tells us what a new symbol means, we have no way of learning its meaning. For the fashion-conscious, it's a constant struggle to keep up with what new item of clothing or jewelry, what brand of watch, car, or sunglasses is the new symbol of status, prestige, and wealth. Are tattoos a good or bad symbol? What about pierced ears, noses, or lips? New symbols are constantly being created, and the meanings of old symbols constantly change. As anyone who has raised a teenager knows, you have to work hard to keep up with all their new symbols and what they mean.

New Words

In addition to nonverbal symbols, we are constantly inventing new verbal symbols, or new words. Usually we learn the

meaning of a new word through context, but sometimes we may resort to a dictionary. So dictionaries are constantly revised to include new words and new meanings for old words, and to drop words that are no longer used. When's the last time you heard or read these words: bespawl (to spit on), glede (askew), pillowbeer (a pillow slip), or yux (to hiccup)? On the other hand, you've probably come across one or more of these new words: meltdown, bottom line, spin doctor, fax, and software. We keep changing our symbols, verbal and nonverbal, all the time.

Reification: Eating the Menu

Toward the end of the movie *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy watches as the Wizard gives the Scarecrow a college degree, which makes him smart, then gives the Cowardly Lion a medal for courage, which gives him courage, and finally gives the Tin Man a watch in the shape of a heart, which gives him the capability to experience emotions.

Of course, we know that's not the way things work. A medal is only a symbol of courage; it's not the quality itself, nor even an act of courage. A heart is only a symbol of emotion; it's not the emotion itself, nor is it the ability to experience the emotion. A college degree is only a symbol of learning, not the learning itself. And many people with college degrees are not very smart, or even very educated.

We must always remember that the symbol and what it stands for are not the same thing. The flag is not the country; the uniform is not the person; the crucifix, the Star of David, or the Crescent is not the religion; the actor is not the character portrayed; the medal is not the courage; the college degree is not the skill or knowledge.

The Word Is Not the Thing

Another way of saying that the symbol and what it stands for are not the same thing is *the word is not the thing.* The word "hamburger" is not the hamburger. Eating the paper on which the word "hamburger" is printed won't do much to alleviate your hunger. And you certainly won't get rich by writing the word "money" on pieces of paper. The word "sewage" doesn't smell, "boom" doesn't sound loud, and the word "mucus" isn't disgusting.

When we confuse words with the things they represent, we engage in a process called *reification,* which simply means that we treat something we have created verbally as if it had real substance. We make something out of nothing. When this happens, words become traps, as Werner Heisenberg observed, where "the concepts initially formed by abstraction from particular situations . . . acquire a life of their own."[10]

The verb "to be" is the principal way we engage in reification. Since this verb accounts for about one-third of all the

verbs that occur in normal discourse, we have a tendency to engage constantly in reification. In fact, we do it so often that we rarely notice we're doing it, and notice even less what this process is doing to us and to our attempts to communicate with one another.

It's not unusual to run across something like the following comment:

> Don't call them "guerrillas" or "revolutionaries" or "freedom fighters." Those who use car bombs to kill innocent civilians in the name of freedom for the Palestinian people are "terrorists" and "murderers," and that's what we should call them.

What our commentator seems to be saying is that someone who kills another, whether intentionally or unintentionally, by exploding a car bomb might be called a "guerrilla" or a "freedom fighter," but the *real* name for such a person is murderer. Our commentator suggests that our discussions would be a lot clearer if we would just use the real names, the right words, for things instead of allowing false and inaccurate words to be pinned on things.

This, of course, is the error of believing that there is a "real" name for something, that the name is inherent in the thing itself. It's very much like the practice of some societies in which you keep your "real" name secret because anyone who knows your "real" name has power over you. (The fairy tale of Rumpelstiltskin is an illustration of this belief in the power of names.) While we dismiss such a belief as

"primitive," we may well believe what our commentator above believes: that the "real" name for someone who kills civilians is "murderer." What that person *is* is one thing; what a person *is called* is quite another matter.

In 1992, the U.S. Department of Justice investigated serious environmental crimes at the Rocky Flats, Colorado, nuclear weapons plant. The grand jury investigating the crimes, and many other officials, believed the government should have pursued criminal charges against the officers of the Rockwell International Corporation, the company that operated the plant under contract with the federal government. But the government settled the charges against Rockwell for a record $18.5 million fine and no criminal prosecutions. Deputy Assistant Attorney General Barry Hartman, head of the Justice Department's Natural Resources Division, explained why no criminal charges were pressed: "Environmental crimes are not like organized crime or drugs. There you have bad people doing bad things. With environmental crimes, you have decent people doing bad things."[11]

Again, we have to remember that people are neither decent nor bad. People may do things that we label decent or bad, but it is the action and not the person who is bad. When we call someone a bad person, we really mean this is a person who does what we call bad things. That is, a person isn't bad or decent until we label him, and we base our label on the person's actions.

Mr. Hartman thinks that people have a "real" name, that there are bad people and decent people, and he can tell them

apart. For Mr. Hartman, the people running the Rocky Flats plant are "good" people, and such people don't commit criminal acts. Therefore, anything they did couldn't be criminal because "good" people don't commit criminal acts.

I would argue that the executives running the Rocky Flats plant are neither bad nor decent people, but they are people who, according to a grand jury, did bad things: They committed environmental crimes. But Mr. Hartman knows that some people are "decent," even if they commit crimes. I do not mean to make too strong a comparison, but it reminds me of the accounts of how the people running the concentration camps in Germany were such cultured people, listening to opera at night, reading Goethe, and playing with their children. Were they "decent" people too? For Mr. Hartman, bad people sell drugs; decent people commit environmental crimes. Which really has to make you wonder what other things "decent" people do.

Words and the World

There is a difference between the "world" and the words we use to talk about that world. On the one hand, there is the world, which consists of things, processes, and events. On the other hand, there are the names we create for these things, processes, and events. The two are quite separate and distinct and in no way connected, except as we choose to connect them. Yet we keep forgetting this basic fact about

language and symbols, and because we keep forgetting, we get ourselves into all kinds of trouble and end up saying some pretty stupid things.

Naming things or pinning labels on them–that is, using symbols–is an act of the human mind, and a very creative act. But it is just that: a creative act that has nothing to do with the "real" name of anything. Any name we choose to use comes from *us*, not from the thing itself or from nature. We forget this principle at our peril.

Our commentator can call a person who sets off car bombs whatever he wants; that is his privilege. If he wants to call that person a "terrorist" and a "murderer" he certainly can. But that doesn't make those who set off the car bomb either "terrorists" or "murderers." What our commentator is really saying is that this is what he *thinks* such a person should be called. In his political framework and from his political point of view, these are the appropriate labels we should use.

So too with Mr. Hartman of the Justice Department. He can call the executives who committed environmental crimes whatever he wants. But unlike our commentator, whose words have no effect on the lives of the people he labels, when Mr. Hartman decides to use a label, we might say that some criminals escape prosecution.

Others may not agree with our commentator. I am sure that some people, including not a few high officials in a number of governments, would use such words as "freedom fighters," "soldiers," "heroes of the revolution," "defenders of the people," and any number of others. While it is true that

the words you use to describe such people depends on your point of view, it is also true that people who set off car bombs don't have a "real" name any more than anyone else. Consider the following paragraph in place of the one previously cited:

> Don't call them "military personnel" or "our brave boys" or "air crews." Those who use laser-guided bombs to kill innocent civilians in the name of freedom for the American people are terrorists and murderers, and that's what we should call them.

You might object to my version because U.S. Air Force personnel who do their duty aren't murderers. To which I would point out that U.S. Air Force bomber crews aren't anything until someone pins a name on them. And the name that gets pinned on them will depend on the point of view of the name pinner. Whatever name is used will tell us more about the person who has chosen the name than about the thing being named. The use of "terrorist" and "murderer" tells us about the political viewpoint of our commentator and little about the people who set off the car bomb.

Finally, you might note the phrase "innocent civilians." What, you might ask, is a civilian, and what makes a civilian innocent? During World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and every war since then, "innocent civilians" have been killed, many quite deliberately, as in the massive bombing of cities in England, Germany, Japan, and many

other countries. Were such bombing attacks acts of "terror" and "murder?" Or were they an unfortunate but unavoidable consequence of a strategic bombing campaign to reduce the enemy's ability to wage war? Or were they instances of "incontinent ordnance?"

The Three Umpires

The problems of confusing words and things is illustrated in the story of the three umpires who are describing what they do. The first umpire says, "There are balls, and there are strikes, and I call them as they are." The second umpire says, "There are balls, and there are strikes, and I call them as I see them." The third umpire says, "There are balls, and there are strikes, but they're nothing until I call them."

The first umpire confuses the word and the thing by assuming that "balls" and "strikes" exist and his job is to identify which is which. This umpire assumes that the label he uses identifies the reality. The second umpire realizes that the word is not the thing and that whatever word he uses is simply his perception of reality. However, the third umpire illustrates the social power of treating words as things. Those who put labels on things exercise great power, for the consequences of labels are significant and far-reaching. After all, are those who planted the car bomb "terrorists" and "murderers" or "guerrillas" and "freedom fighters"?

Naming things is a human act, it is not an act of nature. We are the ones who through language create things out of the phenomena around us. Yet we forget that we control this process and let the process control us. We act as if the very things we have created are beyond our control. Indeed, we act as if there's nothing we can do about it. The world we create with words is not the same as the world in which we live. We confuse the two at our peril.

The Cowardly Lion has no more courage after receiving his medal than before, the Tin Man is as emotionless after receiving his heart as before, and the Scarecrow is as ignorant after receiving his college degree as he was before the degree was conferred by the Wizard. The word is not the thing. The menu is not the meal. Forgetting this principle can lead to a signal reaction.

Watch Out for Those Signal Reactions

A signal reaction simply means that we have an automatic, unthinking response to a symbol, much like the famed reaction observed by Ivan Pavlov: Ring the bell and the dog salivates even when the food isn't there. A signal reaction is a reaction that occurs whether or not the conditions warrant. Yell "Fire!" in a building and everyone will run for the closest exit. I doubt if many people will look around to see whether there is a fire and then decide to leave the building.

On the other hand, a symbol reaction is a delayed reaction, a reaction that is conditional upon the circumstances. A symbol reaction involves some analysis and thought because we know that there is no necessary connection between the symbol and that for which it stands. "Like all liberals, my opponent believes in continuing the bankrupt policies of the welfare state," says the candidate. To which the object of his comments responds, "My opponent, like all conservatives, wants to destroy Medicare, gut the social programs that provide a minimum of care for millions of poor children, and repeal the laws that protect our environment from the ravages of the unchecked greed of big business." If we choose to respond to these statements not with a signal reaction as our speakers would like but with a symbol reaction, we would find both statements sorely wanting as examples of responsible public discourse, no matter what our political beliefs.

When the Word Becomes the Thing

A signal reaction occurs when we identify the symbol with the thing for which it stands, when the word becomes the thing. A signal reaction means we're acting without thinking, which is probably a good thing when someone yells "Fire!" or "Duck!" But signal reactions can lead to results that range from the tragic to the absurd. Consider these examples.

Gore Vidal, in an article in *Esquire* magazine, recounts the tragic story of Ibrahim, the Egyptian soldier who was on

maneuvers in the desert. One night, Ibrahim forgot the password, so when he approached the guard post he could not give it when challenged. So Ibrahim says, "Look, I forget. I did know but now I forget the password but you know me, anyway, you know it's Ibrahim." But they shot him anyway because they had orders to shoot anyone who couldn't give the password. "Oh, they were sorry, very sorry," says the narrator of the story, "because they knew it was Ibrahim, but you see, he did not know the password." Even Ibrahim joined in the signal reaction that caused his death, because as he was dying he said they were right to kill him.[12]

Then there's this story from the *New York Post.* On November 30, 1971, five heavily armed men shot out the glass doors of a New York bank and entered the bank firing automatic weapons, wounding twelve people. One of the bank tellers ran from the robbers and made it to an upstairs women's restroom. One gunman chased her, but he stopped at the door to the ladies' room, shouting at her to come out. When she refused, he went downstairs to help his colleagues finish robbing the bank.

The old television show *Candid Camera* used signal reactions as the basis for many of its skits. In one classic example, two telephone booths were placed next to each other. One booth was labeled "Men" and the other "Women." As the camera recorded the scene, no one who used the booths violated the signs. Men used only the booth labeled for men, and women used only the booth labeled for them. Even when there was a line for the men's booth and the women's booth was empty, no man used the women's booth.

In each of these instances, people reacted automatically, without thinking, without taking into consideration what the conditions warranted. Unfortunately for Private Ibrahim it meant his death, while fortunately for the New York bank teller it meant refuge. For the men and women using the telephone booths in the *Candid Camera* segment it meant demonstrating once again why we need to think and consider what the conditions warrant before we act on any symbol.

Sources of Signal Reactions

Signal reactions are an important part of advertising. Many advertisers seek a signal reaction from consumers, especially when it comes to the more expensive, upscale products that have little to distinguish them from their competitors, other than price, fancy packaging, and a big advertising campaign. Advertisers want us to react automatically to a product's name (called brand recognition in the advertising business) so that without considering anything else about the product we buy it. After all, if it's _____ [fill in the brand name], it must be good. Now that's a signal reaction that can pay big money for the manufacturer. To achieve that kind of signal reaction, companies spend hundreds of millions of dollars on advertising.

Slogans are also a source of signal reactions. Slogans are designed to short-circuit thought, not to stimulate it. Slogan

writers want an automatic, unthinking reaction, not a thoughtful, considered response. "America, Love It or Leave It." "Keep America Beautiful." "Better Dead Than Red." "Nixon's the One." "All the Way With LBJ." "It's Morning in America." "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity." "Deutschland Über Alles." I'm sure you can add a few dozen more.

Some words, too, may produce a signal reaction. Sometimes this is not a bad thing. After all, if someone yells "Duck!" you should react instantly and automatically, and not take the time for thoughtful reflection on your course of action. But such instances of signal reaction to words are rare, and are an exception to the rule.

All kinds of people are constantly trying to induce a signal reaction to words, using such words as "fascist," "Communist," "liberal," "conservative," "left wing," "right wing," "racist," "feminazi," "welfare queen," "ruling class," "bureaucrat," and many others. The list is endless. Our job is to guard against signal reactions to words and instead respond to words with the careful, thoughtful reflection and consideration we should give to all symbols.

Governments and politicians also seek to induce signal reactions to words. Often these groups don't want their words given careful, analytical consideration. What they seek instead is a knee-jerk reaction. And they work hard to achieve a signal reaction and to use words to induce a signal reaction. Here's just one example of how hard some politicians work to use words to produce signal reactions in voters.

GOPAC and Signal Reactions

In 1990, GOPAC, a conservative Republican group whose general chairman was Representative Newt Gingrich, published a booklet titled *Language: A Key Mechanism of Control.* The booklet, which was designed for use by Republican candidates for office, contained a list of 133 words that GOPAC urged candidates to use to attack their opponents and to praise themselves. "The words and phrases are powerful," said the mailing to candidates. "Read them. Memorize as many as possible. And remember that like any tool, these words will not help if they are not used."

The booklet included sixty-nine "Optimistic Positive Governing Words" to "help define your campaign and your vision." Among the words listed were "environment, peace, freedom, fair, flag, rights, duty, we/us/our, moral, family, children, truth, humane, care(ing), hard-working, liberty, reformer, vision, visionary, confident, and candid." Thus, using this list, a candidate could call himself a "humane, confident, caring, hard-working reformer who has a moral vision of peace, freedom, and liberty that we can all build through a crusade for prosperity and truth."

Included also was a list of sixty-four "Contrasting Words" to "define our opponents" and "create a clear and easily understood contrast." The booklet recommended: "Apply these to the opponent, their record, proposals and their party." Among the words in this list were: "traitors, betray, sick, pathetic, lie, liberal, radical, hypocrisy, corruption, permissive attitude, greed, self-serving, ideological, they/them,

anti-flag, anti-family, anti-child, anti-jobs, unionized bureaucracy, impose, and coercion." Using this list, you could call your opponent a "sick, pathetic, incompetent, liberal traitor whose self-serving permissive attitude promotes a unionized bureaucracy and an anti-flag, anti-family, anti-child, anti-jobs ideology."[13]

With these lists, Republican candidates didn't have to bother with thinking or knowing anything. They didn't have to examine, evaluate, or respond to their opponents' proposals and ideas, just label them using the words provided. By following Gingrich's advice, Republican candidates also didn't need to get involved with specific proposals or any details of their ideas and beliefs. No need for logic or reason, or any kind of thought. The candidates only had to pull a few words off the list, drop them in their speeches, and repeat them if asked questions. No thinking necessary by either candidate or voter.

George Orwell had his own version of the signal reaction; he called it "duckspeak," which was "to quack like a duck."

Duckspeak has no meaning. With duckspeak it makes no difference what the subject is, "whatever it was, you could be certain that every word of it was pure orthodoxy. . . ." After all, "it was not the man's brain that was speaking; it was his larynx. The stuff that was coming out of him consisted of words but it was not speech in the true sense; it was a noise uttered in unconsciousness, like the quacking of a duck." With the efficient use of duckspeak, the speaker can ensure orthodoxy, which "means not thinking–not needing to think. Orthodoxy is unconsciousness."[14]

Signal Reactions, Duckspeak, and Doublespeak

When we have speakers who use words without thought, who use words only for the automatic, unthinking reaction they will produce, when we have an audience that has such a response, we are engaging in duckspeak, a kind of signal reaction. With duckspeak, as with words designed to induce a signal reaction, we are not using symbols to communicate.

When the Environmental Protection Agency insisted on using the term "wet deposition" for acid rain, it effectively prevented people from thinking about the causes and consequences of acid rain. Since no one knows what "wet deposition" is, there can be no symbol reaction. When I read about a "severe adjustment process" I'm not sure what reaction to have since there is no way I can know that this is another phrase for a recession. The doublespeak of signal reaction can work well to blunt all thought and leave a void where there should be meaning, thought, and action.