A WORD BY ANY OTHER NAME

STEVE STOCKDALE*

WORDS HAVE BEEN in the news a lot lately. Of course, one could make the argument that what we call “the news” is nothing but words. We hear and read about “the news” in the words that are handed to us by others.

Even when we view wordless videos of tsunami waves rushing through village streets and hear desperate screams for help, those sights and sounds have been presented to us in a verbal context.

Then, having heard, read, and seen “the news,” we think about “the news” and talk about “the news” and argue about “the news” using these same words.

I confess that I don’t see anything particularly interesting or significant about studying words. There’s a lot of wisdom in the “rose by any other name would smell as sweet” thing. Whether you use this word or that word, changing the word doesn’t change whatever it is that the word is referring to.

* Steve Stockdale is executive director of the Institute of General Semantics in Fort Worth and is a member of the Fort Worth Star-Telegram’s community columnist panel.
However, when people act differently when one word is substituted for another; when their attitudes change upon hearing a report phrased in certain language; when a message can be intentionally framed to manipulate how people will respond to it — now that I find not only interesting but crucially important.

Locally, (Fort Worth-Dallas) the word “meteorologist” has been in the news. Should someone who reports the weather be allowed to refer to herself as a “meteorologist” if she doesn’t have a “meteorology” degree? Whether she’s called a “weather reporter,” a “forecaster,” a “meteorologist” or a “senior staff meteorologist,” is the title going to change her forecast?

I would argue that the job title doesn’t materially affect the work itself. What matters is how the viewing public reacts to the words. If Channel X promotes so-and-so as a “weather forecaster” and Channel Y promotes you-know-who as “senior staff meteorologist whose forecast has the seal of approval of . . .,” you can probably guess the results.

It’s possible that a person with a doctorate in meteorology will consistently make more accurate forecasts than an attractive English major who wants to become an “on-air personality.” It’s also possible that a mere “forecaster” with 30 years of experience might prove more reliable than a young degreed “meteorologist” who graduated magna cumulus laude.

Is it the quality of the work that matters or the words in the credentials?

Nationally, our political landscape is littered with verbal land mines.

The war in Iraq has popularized the phrase “the situation on the ground.” We hear reports from foreign correspondents that refer to “the situation on the ground.” Is there some situation in the war that matters other than “the situation on the ground”?

I believe that this phrase has emerged because it’s a politically correct euphemism used to distinguish what’s actually happening from what political leaders want us to believe. On the one hand, we have the language coming out of Washington about what’s going on in Iraq; on the other hand, there’s “the situation on the ground.”

In the Social Security debate, we have the phrase “personal accounts” pitted against “privatization.” We have conservatives changing the terms of the environmental debate from “global warming” to “global climate change.” (It’s too bad we don’t have a properly credentialed “meteorologist” handy to settle which phrase is meteorologically correct.)

Last fall, then-Secretary of State Colin Powell made news around the world when he used “genocide” in relation to the “situation on the ground” in Darfur, Sudan.
The appropriateness of the word “genocide” was debated as a factor in how nations around the world should respond. So far as I can determine, nobody disputes the assertion that government-backed janjaweed militias are committing atrocities against the people of western Sudan. But it seems as though the international response is conditioned by a word: If it’s “genocide,” we do X; if it’s not “genocide,” we can get by with just Y.

More than 70 years ago, the author of a book titled *Science and Sanity* forecasted that “those who rule the symbols rule us.”

We are confronted every day by those who seek to “rule” our thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors. From frivolous advertising to ratings-driven television to global propaganda, we are bombarded by persuasive words, images, and symbols.

The challenge as I see it is: Who rules your symbols?

President George W. Bush has, to put it in terms used by S.I. Hayakawa, learned to purr when some of his policies might make opponents snarl. Hayakawa wrote about the use of purr words, terms that make people feel good about the subject being addressed and even at times the speaker, and snarl words, terms that make people react negatively.

These terms, on both ends of the spectrum, are usually on a fairly high order of abstraction. They might even represent higher order ideals, which are difficult to define and vary from user to user. Specifics and operational definitions are usually lacking. You have to work to bring these terms down to lower levels of abstractions by asking, “What do you mean?”

In both the State of the Union address and his inaugural speech, President Bush loaded up on purr words, but used snarl terms when talking about terrorists and others he opposes.
As a new Congress gathers, all of us in the elected branches of government share a great privilege: We have been placed in office by the votes of the people we serve. And tonight that is a privilege we share with newly elected leaders of Afghanistan, the Palestinian territories, Ukraine, and a free and sovereign Iraq.

Two weeks ago, I stood on the steps of this Capitol and renewed the commitment of our nation to the guiding ideal of liberty for all. This evening I will set forth policies to advance that ideal at home and around the world.

Certainly, Bush looks modest and humble when he talks about a great privilege. That privilege of serving is extended to a free and sovereign Iraq.

Bush reminds us that he renewed the commitment of our nation. To what you might ask? Well to the guiding light of liberty for all. And, in his speech, he set forth plans for policies that advance that ideal at home and around the world.

All the boldfaced terms have positive connotations. They are intended to make us feel good about our humble leaders, our nation, and ourselves. Who can argue with a country being free and sovereign?

A country that makes a commitment demonstrates courage and compassion for others. And, who wouldn’t follow a guiding light of liberty?

You could fill this entire issue of ETC with such terms from just these two of Bush’s speeches. But, when you start to search for the terms’ referents, to bring the language down to a lower level of abstraction, you have to start asking some questions.

When Bush says he was placed in office by the votes of the people he serves, is he acknowledging the sovereignty of all voters, or just those who elected him? Is it more of a privilege for Republicans to serve their constituency than for Democrats to serve theirs, in Bush’s set of priorities? Most experts say the election in Iraq is only a first step. The 275 people elected are in office primarily to write a Constitution and then hold another election. Insurgents still blow up people and things daily. Freedom from fear, economic struggles, and clashes of ethnic sub-cultures seems a long way off.

As for the commitment of our nation, some would argue we are over-committed, as we slip deeper into debt at least in part because of the cost of the war, while more American soldiers die each week.
When you analyze the guiding light of liberty for all, you have to ask questions like: Who’s holding the light? What form will liberty take in various countries? Will we impose our form of government on countries in the name of liberty? Later in his speech, Bush addressed the latter question when he said the goal was not to force countries to adopt our government style. Will his actions reflect this intention or the one implicit in his earlier statement?

The last bold-type statement above, the one about policies that “advance that ideal [of liberty for all] at home and around the world,” might require the most questioning. Just how does Bush plan to advance that ideal, which remains rather vaguely defined, at home and around the world? Will he use military force in Iran and Korea? Will we support totalitarian regimes in some nations, such as in Saudi Arabia, and condemn them in others? Will we open schools in Iraq and elsewhere while closing them in this country? At home, will we “fix” Social Security and deplete the fund more quickly than it is dwindling now?

When you ask these questions, you often leave yourself open for accusations of political bias. But, that should not deter you. Asking the critical questions, especially those that start with who, what, when, where and why, is the start of taking control of the symbols of political rule rather than allowing politicians, be they Republicans or Democrats, to use them to manipulate you.

**Snaaarling Too**

Bush also used his share of snarl words. For example:

*In the long term, the peace we seek will only be achieved by eliminating the conditions that feed radicalism and ideologies of murder. If whole regions of the world remain in despair and grow in hatred, they will be the recruiting grounds for terror, and that terror will stalk America and other free nations for decades.*

*The only force powerful enough to stop the rise of tyranny and terror, and replace hatred with hope, is the force of human freedom.*

**Radicalism** and **ideologies of murder** are not good things. Thinking about them can scare you. Of course, both Republicans and Democrats tried to convince you last fall that they could best protect you. George W. was apparently more convincing.
Despair, hatred, tyranny and terror also are scary things. And, who wants to be stalked? But, hope and human freedom, a couple of purr words, can eliminate all those nasty things. We’re just not sure yet of exactly how.

It’s hard to disagree with ideas formulated by these rather vague terms. They are examples of affective language, designed to appeal to emotions, which often can be very effective in swaying public opinion and manipulating thinking and feeling.

Visual language can also be very effective in manipulation. Perhaps the most moving part of the State of the Union speech came with the embrace between the Iraqi woman and the American mother who had lost her son in the war. It looked genuine and spontaneous.

But, if I might exercise my cynical side, was it coincidence that the two women sat a row apart? I think not. And, does it make you uncomfortable when people who have gone through pain and suffering are used as symbols by any politician? It’s become a regular technique in these big speeches.

Neither Bush’s State of the Union nor his inaugural speech was strong on details. You didn’t really learn how he plans to “fix” Social Security, reduce the deficit, provide affordable health care, or exit from Iraq without leaving a civil war behind.

Some of those details will be included in the actual proposals Bush sends to Congress, in the priorities of his budget and his actions as Commander in Chief. They won’t be as evident as the rhetoric in his speeches. You’ll have to dig into media reports, and perhaps even beyond them to access actual administrative and legislative proposals on line or available through the Library of Congress.

How many of you will actually take the time to do that? Not many. Politicians, not just George W. Bush, but others too, know that. They leave the details to the insiders, and use snarl and purr words to spin their ideas and sway public opinion.
CALLING OUT THE SYMBOL RULERS

THINKING INSIDE THE FRAME

Nora Miller*

One of the few bright spots for me in the recent presidential election ordeal came when I first read about framing in a UC Berkeley News interview with George Lakoff. (Powell, 2003) The information didn’t change the outcome of any race, as far as I know. But for me, and I think, for general semantics, the work of the cognitive scientist and linguist from Berkeley promises some deeply significant reverberations.

Lakoff has a curriculum vitae appropriate for someone in his position in the world of linguistics — fellowships, visiting professorships at international institutions, a long list of published research. For my purposes, his most significant work deals with his growing theory of the role of metaphor in daily language and culture. Historically, most linguists and philosophers relegated metaphor to the realm of creative writing, useful for eliciting emotional responses, but not relevant to the study of meaning. Lakoff has developed a model of metaphor in which metaphors serve a much deeper and more integral purpose in daily language, perception, and thought — namely, to provide a frame for understanding abstract aspects of life in terms of concrete, familiar objects and activities. A metaphor comes equipped with a small constellation of related...

* Nora Miller, Assistant Editor of ETC, lives near Portland, Oregon, where she has undertaken to discover what joy may come from the form of living called “early retirement.” This involves technical support for a small government website, freelance editing, writing and photography, taking care of an also-retired significant other, and looking for sun wherever she can find it.
terms that put flesh on the abstract target, enabling a more certain and complete transfer of meaning. Metaphors put hard-to-grasp abstract concepts in terms of familiar concrete images.

For example, I could tell you that I can really sink my teeth into your idea. Because you understand eating, you get the benefit not only of the basic metaphor that “thought is food,” but also the related notions that “thought is nourishing,” “good thoughts are satisfying to consume,” etc. I don’t have to say any of those things, but you know them nonetheless. These metaphoric constellations generally function without our awareness. Indeed, most of us would have a hard time coming up with a single, fundamental metaphor that governs our language, even though we can recognize metaphors immediately once we hear them. Lakoff gives us many examples in *Metaphors We Live By*: “Good is up.” (p.16) “Argument is war.” (p.4) “Love is a journey.” (p.44) We use metaphors so instinctively we might say “they are just a part of the language.” But while some more basic metaphors, based on the physical nature of humans in the environment, figure in nearly all languages, according to Lakoff, many differ from culture to culture. They belong to the cultural fundament, not to the natural world. (pp.39-40). (Where have we heard that before?)

So what does all this have to do with elections?

According to Lakoff, everything — assuming by “everything” you mean, who votes, why they vote and who wins and loses. As the political campaigns started up their organ grinders in late 2003, Lakoff found himself wondering why Democratic Party issues didn’t generate more votes in swing states. The Davis-Schwarzenegger election in California produced some alarming and perplexing data on voter behavior. After hearing a carefully non-partisan description of the platforms of each candidate, voters generally rated Davis’ plan as more likely to favor their personal economic situation. But when asked their likely choice for governor, they generally picked Schwarzenegger. Lakoff wondered why and applied his theory of metaphor and meaning to see if he could come up with an explanation. He thinks he found one.

In *Don’t Think of an Elephant*, his recent best seller, Lakoff claims that Schwarzenegger won in part because his personality, his celebrity, his movie career, his very body, personify the conservative Republican ideal of the strong father. (p.42) Arnold “was” the metaphor. With that metaphor comes the constellation of adjunct meanings, like security, discipline, comfort, certainty, and control. If you ask most Californians if they want a disciplinarian for a governor, they might hesitate. But with someone like Schwarzenegger running for the office, you don’t have to ask and the voters don’t have to answer. His presence activates the frame of the strong father and the voters bask in the appeal of the parent who will take care of all their problems for them.
Davis on the other hand, presented a blurred, indefinite, almost disturbing message, thanks in part to the way the media framed him, and in part to his own choice of campaign tactics. Lakoff contends that Davis made the same mistakes that the entire party has made for the past several years at least — arguing defensively against a much more certain opponent using the opponent’s language, thereby reinforcing the opponent’s frame and losing the argument in the process.

Conversely, metaphors can also obscure or negate facts that don’t fit into the metaphor. If I want to promote a TV show by telling you that it will “feed children’s brains,” I rely on the “thought is food” frame to trigger the “thought is nourishing” concept, while not having to address the issue of what the show might make children think about. A metaphor makes a concept easier to grasp, but it does not necessarily tell the whole story and it may very well tell a false story.

It works like this: say you want voters to eliminate the estate tax. Now factually, the estate tax affects a miniscule percentage of the population — in 1997, 98 percent of estates were not required to pay any tax at all. (Gale and Slemrod, p.2) When the Republican Party decided to promote the repeal of this tax (part of a larger strategic policy to rearrange the mechanisms of wealth transfer) they needed a new frame. As Frank Luntz put it in the PBS Frontline episode, “The Persuaders,” “nobody really knows what an estate is, but they certainly know what it means to be taxed when you die.” So the Republican machine changed the frame by changing the name — the estate tax became the “death tax.” Now, even though 98 percent of people will never pay this tax, and despite the fact that in 1997 this tax generated $28 billion dollars from a mere 45,000 estates, now most people polled favor repeal of this tax, because “taxing at death is immoral.” (p.4)

Lakoff, in collaboration with the Rockridge Institute, wrote Don’t Think of an Elephant primarily to educate the Democratic Party on the use of framing. The project evolved from an issue paper on the Rockridge website titled “Simple Framing” in which Lakoff presents the following “moral principles” of framing:

1. Every word evokes a frame — every word brings with it related concepts and images. If I say “cat” you immediately have at your mental fingertips a wealth of associations: paws, purring, petting, bad luck, chasing mice, etc., etc.

2. Words defined within the frame evoke the frame — the word “purr” in the sentence “Tommy purred and twitched his tail” evokes the “cat” frame and you can tell Tommy is probably a cat without my saying so.
3. Negating a frame evokes the frame — “Don’t think of a cat” paradoxically requires you to think of a cat in order to “not” think of it.

4. Evoking the frame reinforces the frame — because of the way the brain works, every time the “cat” circuit is activated, it becomes stronger. Even negative references to a frame reinforce the life of the frame, making it seem ever more familiar, acceptable, “real.”

You can detect these “moral principles” in many of the political mechanisms of the Republican Party, which has spent millions of dollars in recent decades for research on and development of effective use of language. The resulting elections won and legislation passed has for me validated Lakoff’s theory.

Why should the world of general semantics take notice of this theory?

First and most obviously, framing concerns language, and we have an interest in anything that brings consciousness of language use to the public’s attention. One of the two major parties has begun a fundamental, nation-wide discussion of how the words politicians use can influence the way voters evaluate the issues that should decide elections. The other major party has apparently known about framing for years and has quietly institutionalized it into their national and local organizations. Something that has changed political language this extensively demands our attention and study.

Second, the principles of framing, as described by Lakoff, make use of certain formulations of general semantics, and we might want to consider the implications of this coincidence. For example, we might word the four moral principles this way:

1. The definition of a word depends on the organism-as-a-whole-in-its-environment. A word does not exist in a vacuum but relates to many other words and images for its comprehension. (A word evokes a frame.)

2. You understand a word on the basis of a mental map, and you bring to bear the entire map on the matter of understanding. (Words defined within the frame evoke the frame.)

3. Using a word, regardless of purpose, involves traversing the map you use to understand the word. (Negating a frame evokes the frame.)

4. Mental processes build mental habits. The repeated use of a word can lead to familiarity and familiarity can obstruct consciousness of abstraction. (Evoking the frame reinforces the frame.)
Thinking of frames in terms of maps reminds us that the frame cannot convey “all” about the subject any more than the map can fully convey the territory it represents.

I think we could say that Lakoff’s publicizing of the issue of metaphoric framing encourages consciousness of abstracting and delayed reactions. Knowing that politicians or newscasters might use selected words to evoke a frame that will influence your ability to evaluate their messages gives you some chance of avoiding the immediate reaction in favor of a more considered, and possibly contrary, opinion.

For general semantics, as a subject of study and as a tool for personal growth, Lakoff’s model represents an interesting and useful development. I submit that we will benefit from following the development of his work and from observing any influence the theory of framing may have on the political language of tomorrow.

NOTE

As a sign that the Democratic Party has come to see the value of Lakoff’s insights on language and framing, we note the recent election of former Presidential candidate Governor Howard Dean as the new chair for the Democratic National Committee. Dean has promoted Lakoff’s framing theories within the party and in his election suggests that we can expect more from the Democrats on this subject in the future.

REFERENCES


