

Doubts About Doublespeak

William Lutz

It has been said that the only sure (or certain) things we cannot change are death and taxes. Well, that is not exactly right. We can call them "terminal living" and "revenue enhancement" to make people feel better about them. And that, in part, is the nature of what William Lutz rails against here: doublespeak. It is language intended not to reveal but to conceal, not to communicate but to obfuscate. In this essay, Lutz categorizes four kinds of doublespeak, distinguishing annoying though relatively harmless professional jargon from ruthlessly devious coinages such as "ethnic cleansing," which attempt to mask barbaric acts.

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1 During the past year, we learned that we can shop at a "unique retail biosphere" instead of a farmers' market, where we can buy items made of "synthetic glass" instead of plastic, or purchase a "high velocity, multipurpose air circulator," or electric fan. A "waste-water conveyance facility" may "exceed the odor threshold" from time to time due to the presence of "regulated human nutrients," but that is not to be confused with a sewage plant that stinks up the neighborhood with sewage sludge. Nor should we confuse a "resource development park" with a dump. Thus does doublespeak continue to spread.

2 Doublespeak is language which pretends to communicate but doesn't. It is language which makes the bad seem good, the negative seem positive, the unpleasant seem attractive, or at least tolerable. It is language which avoids, shifts or denies responsibility; language which is at variance with its real or purported meaning. It is language which conceals or prevents thought.

3 Doublespeak is all around us. We are asked to check our packages at the desk "for our convenience" when it's not for our convenience at all but for someone else's convenience. We see advertisements for "preowned," "experienced" or "previously distinguished" cars, not used cars and for "genuine imitation leather," "virgin vinyl" or "real counterfeit diamonds." Television offers not reruns but "encore telecasts." There are no slums or ghettos, just the "inner city" or "substandard housing" where the "disadvantaged" or "economically nonaffluent" live and where there might be a problem with "substance abuse." Nonprofit organizations don't make a profit, they have "negative deficits" or experience "revenue excesses." With doublespeak it's not dying but "terminal living" or "negative patient care outcome."

4 There are four kinds of doublespeak. The first kind is the euphemism, a word or phrase designed to avoid a harsh or distasteful reality. Used to mislead or deceive, the euphemism becomes doublespeak. In 1984 the U.S. State Department's annual reports on the status of human rights around the world ceased using the word "killing." Instead the State Department used the phrase "unlawful or arbitrary deprivation of life," thus avoiding the embarrassing situation of government-sanctioned killing in countries supported by the United States.

5 A second kind of doublespeak is jargon, the specialized language of a trade, profession or similar group, such as doctors, lawyers, plumbers or car mechanics. Legitimately used, jargon allows members of a group to communicate with each other clearly, efficiently and quickly. Lawyers and tax accountants speak to each other of an "involuntary conversion" of property, a legal term that means the loss or destruction of property through theft, accident or condemnation. But when lawyers or tax accountants use unfamiliar terms to speak to others, then the jargon becomes doublespeak.

6 In 1978 a commercial 727 crashed on takeoff, killing three passengers, injuring 21 others and destroying the airplane. The insured value of the airplane was greater than its book value, so the airline made a profit of \$1.7 million, creating two problems: the airline didn't want to talk about one of its airplanes crashing, yet it had to account for that \$1.7 million profit in its annual report to its stockholders. The airline solved both problems by inserting a footnote in its annual report which explained that the \$1.7 million was due to "the involuntary conversion of a 727."

7 A third kind of doublespeak is gobbledygook or bureaucratese. Such doublespeak is simply a matter of overwhelming the audience with words—the more the better. Alan Greenspan, a polished practitioner of bureaucratese, once testified before a Senate committee that "it is a tricky problem to find the particular calibration in timing that would be appropriate to stem the acceleration in risk premiums created by falling incomes without prematurely aborting the decline in the inflation-generated risk premiums."

8 The fourth kind of doublespeak is inflated language, which is designed to make the ordinary seem extraordinary, to make everyday things seem impressive, to give an air of importance to people or situations, to make the simple seem complex. Thus do car mechanics become "automotive internists," elevator operators become "members of the vertical transportation corps," grocery store checkout clerks become "career associate scanning professionals," and smelling something becomes "organoleptic analysis."

9 Doublespeak is not the product of careless language or sloppy thinking. Quite the opposite. Doublespeak is language carefully designed and constructed to appeal to communicate when in fact it doesn't. It is language designed not to lead but mislead. Thus, it's not a tax increase but "revenue enhancement" or "tax-base broadening." So how can you complain about higher taxes? Those aren't useless billion dollar pork barrel projects; they're really "congressional projects of national significance," so don't complain about wasteful government spending. That isn't the Mafia in Atlantic City; those are just "members of a career-offender cartel," so don't worry about the influence of organized crime in the city.

10 New doublespeak is created every day. The Environmental Protection Agency once called acid rain "poorly-buffered precipitation" then dropped that term in favor of "atmospheric deposition of anthropogenically-derived acidic substances," but recently decided that acid rain should be called "wet deposition." The Pentagon, which has in the past given us such classic doublespeak as "hexiform rotatable surface compression unit" for steel nut, just published a pamphlet warning soldiers that exposure to nerve gas will lead to "immediate permanent incapacitation." That's almost as good as the Pentagon's official term "servicing the target," meaning to kill

the enemy. Meanwhile, the Department of Energy wants to establish a “monitored retrievable storage site,” a place once known as a dump for spent nuclear fuel.

11 Bad economic times give rise to lots of new doublespeak designed to avoid some very unpleasant economic realities. As the “contained depression” continues so does the corporate policy of making up even more new terms to avoid the simple, and easily understandable, term “layoff.” So it is that corporations “reposition,” “restructure,” “reshape,” or “realign” the company and “reduce duplication” through “release of resources” that involves a “permanent downsizing” or a “payroll adjustment” that results in a number of employees being “involuntarily terminated.”

12 Other countries regularly contribute to doublespeak. In Japan, where baldness is called “hair disadvantaged,” the economy is undergoing a “severe adjustment process,” while in Canada there is an “involuntary downward development” of the work force. For some government agencies in Canada, wastepaper baskets have become “user friendly, space effective, flexible, deskside sortation units.” Politicians in Canada may engage in “reality augmentation,” but they never lie. As part of their new freedom, the people of Moscow can visit “intimacy salons,” or sex shops as they’re known in other countries. When dealing with the bureaucracy in Russia, people know that they should show officials “normal gratitude,” or give them a bribe.

13 The worst doublespeak is the doublespeak of death. It is the language, wrote George Orwell in 1946, that is “largely the defense of the indefensible . . . designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.” In the doublespeak of death, Orwell continued, “defenseless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets. This is called pacification. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry. This is called transfer of population or rectification of frontiers.” Today, in a country once called Yugoslavia, this is called “ethnic cleansing.”

14 It’s easy to laugh off doublespeak. After all, we all know what’s going on, so what’s the harm? But we don’t always know what’s going on, and when that happens, doublespeak accomplishes its ends. It alters our perception of reality. It deprives us of the tools we need to develop, advance and preserve our society, our culture, our civilization. It breeds suspicion, cynicism, distrust and, ultimately, hostility. It delivers us into the hands of those who do not have our interests at heart. As Samuel Johnson noted in 18th century England, even the devils in hell do not lie to one another, since the society of hell could not subsist without the truth, any more than any other society.

THINKING CRITICALLY

1. What is doublespeak, according to Lutz? What is its purpose?
2. Lutz divides doublespeak into four types. What are they? Give some of your own examples of each type. As best you can, rank these four types according to which are most offensive or harmful. Explain your choices.
3. In paragraph 4, Lutz classifies euphemisms as a form of doublespeak. In your opinion, are there instances when euphemisms are useful? Explain your answer.

4. Lutz says that “inflated language” is designed to make the ordinary seem extraordinary, as with elevated job titles. In your opinion, is there anything wrong with elevating job titles in this way? Why or why not?
5. In your opinion, is doublespeak as widespread as Lutz claims? Are its effects as serious as he perceives them to be?
6. Examine Lutz’s introductory paragraph. How does this paragraph set the tone for the piece? Is it effective?
7. What is the opposing view in this piece? How does Lutz handle it in his argument? Are there counterarguments that Lutz has missed in his essay?
8. Are there any places in the essay where Lutz employs doublespeak in his own writing? If so, what effect does this have on your reading?
9. Consider Lutz’s voice in this article. Is he a reliable narrator? Does he provide adequate documentation for his assertions? Cite specific examples from the text to support your answers.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Write an essay in which you examine instances of doublespeak in the media, particular profession, or among your acquaintances. Make a case either for or against its usage.
2. Was there ever a time when doublespeak had an impact on your life? Write a personal narrative reflecting on the effect, positive or negative, that doublespeak has had on your experience. You might consider having been swayed by advertising or political jargon.
3. Lutz defines doublespeak as “language which conceals or prevents thought” a “language which pretends to communicate but doesn’t.” Write an essay describing an experience wherein you used doublespeak. What was your goal in communicating as such? How was doublespeak useful to you in this situation?
4. Over the course of one day, record all the instances of doublespeak you encounter—from ads, TV shows, news articles, films, menus, and so on. (Whenever possible, photocopy or tape these instances.) In a paper, try to classify the different kinds of doublespeak you found. Analyze the different functions of doublespeak and try to determine its effects on the intended audience.
5. Look through a newspaper or magazine for a short and clear discussion of an interesting topic. Then have some fun rewriting the piece entirely in doublespeak.