

Doubts about Doublespeak

William Lutz

*William Lutz is a professor of English at Rutgers University and was the editor of the Quarterly Review of Doublespeak for fourteen years. Born in Racine, Wisconsin, in 1940, Lutz is best known for his important works Doublespeak: From Revenue Enhancement to Terminal Living (1990) and The New Doublespeak: Why No One Knows What Anyone's Saying Anymore (1996). His most recent book, Doublespeak Defined: Cut through the Bull**** and Get to the Point, was published in 1999. (The term doublespeak comes from the Newspeak vocabulary of George Orwell's novel Nineteen Eighty-Four. It refers to speech or writing that presents two or more contradictory ideas in such a way that an unsuspecting audience is not consciously aware of the contradiction and is likely to be deceived.) As chair of the National Council of Teachers of English's Committee on Public Doublespeak, Lutz has been a watchdog of public officials who use language to "mislead, distort, deceive, inflate, circumvent, and obfuscate." Each year the committee presents the Orwell Awards, recognizing the most outrageous uses of doublespeak in government and business. In the following essay, which first appeared in the July 1993 issue of State Government News, Lutz argues that, far from harmless, "doublespeak alters our perception of reality. It deprives us of the tools we need to develop, advance and preserve our society, our culture, our civilization."*

FOR YOUR JOURNAL

Imagine that you work for a manufacturing plant in your town and that your boss has just told you that you are on the list of people who will be "dehired" or that you are part of a program of "negative employee retention." What would you think was happening to you? Would you be happy about it? What would you think of the language your boss used to describe your situation?

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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.

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."

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.

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.

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."

A third kind of doublespeak is gobbledygook or bureaucratese. 7
Such doublespeak is simply a matter of overwhelming the audience
with words—the more the better. Alan Greenspan, a polished practi-
tioner 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 cre-
ated by falling incomes without prematurely aborting the decline in
the inflation-generated risk premiums.”

The fourth kind of doublespeak is inflated language, which is de- 8
signed to make the ordinary seem extraordinary, to make everyday
things seem impressive, to give an air of importance to people or situ-
ations, to make the simple seem complex. Thus do car mechanics be-
come “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.”

Doublespeak is not the product of careless language or sloppy 9
thinking. Quite the opposite. Doublespeak is language carefully de-
signed and constructed to appear 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 proj-
ects of national significance,” so don't complain about wasteful gov-
ernment spending. That isn't the Mafia in Atlantic City; those are just
“members of a career-offender cartel,” so don't worry about the in-
fluence of organized crime in the city.

New doublespeak is created every day. The Environmental Pro- 10
tection Agency once called acid rain “poorly-buffered precipitation”
then dropped that term in favor of “atmospheric deposition of an-
thropogenically-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. Mean-
while, the Department of Energy wants to establish a “monitored re-
trievable storage site,” a place once known as a dump for spent
nuclear fuel.

Bad economic times give rise to lots of new doublespeak designed 11
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 downsiz-
ing” or a “payroll adjustment” that results in a number of employees
being “involuntarily terminated.”

Other countries regularly contribute to doublespeak. In Japan, 12
where baldness is called “hair disadvantaged,” the economy is under-
going a “severe adjustment process,” while in Canada there is an “in-
voluntary 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 coun-
tries. When dealing with the bureaucracy in Russia, people know that
they should show officials “normal gratitude,” or give them a bribe.

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.”¹

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 Johnson² 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.
