Conversation

American Politics and the English Language

The following eight texts comment directly or indirectly on the role of language in American politics.

Sources

1. Institute for Propaganda Analysis, *How to Detect Propaganda*
2. Michiko Kakutani, *The Word Police*
3. North York Women Teachers' Association, *Nonviolent Language* (table)
4. Mike Lester, *NCAA Native American Mascots* (cartoon)
5. Geoffrey Nunberg, *The -Ism Schism: How Much Wallop Can a Simple Word Pack?*
6. Daniel Okrent, *The War of the Words: A Dispatch from the Front Lines*
7. Letters to the Editor in Response to *The War of the Words*
8. Frank Luntz, from *Words That Work*

After you have read, studied and synthesized these pieces, enter the Conversation by responding to one of the prompts on page 778.

1. *How to Detect Propaganda*

INSTITUTE FOR PROPAGANDA ANALYSIS

The following essay appeared in the monthly newsletter of the Institute for Propaganda Analysis in 1937. The Institute's aim, as stated in one of its early publications, was "to conduct objective, non-partisan studies in the field of propaganda and public opinion . . . to help the intelligent citizen to detect and to analyze propaganda. . . ."

We are fooled by propaganda chiefly because we don't recognize it when we see it. It may be fun to be fooled but, as the cigarette ads used to say, it is more fun to know. We can more easily recognize propaganda when we see it if we are familiar with the seven common propaganda devices. These are:

1. The name-calling device.
2. The glittering-generalities device.
3. The transfer device.
4. The testimonial device.
5. The plain-folks device.
6. The card-stacking device.
7. The band-wagon device.

Why are we fooled by these devices? Because they appeal to our emotions rather than to our reason. They make us believe and do something we would not believe or do if we thought about it calmly, dispassionately. In examining these devices, note that they work most effectively at those times when we are too lazy to think for ourselves; also, they tie into emotions that sway us to be "for" or "against" nations, races, religions, ideals, economic and political policies and practices, and so on through automobiles, cigarettes, radios, toothpastes, presidents, and wars. With our emotions stirred, it may be fun to be fooled by these propaganda devices, but it is more fun and infinitely more in our own interests to know how they work.

Name Calling

"Name calling" is a device to make us form a judgment without examining the evidence upon which it should·be based. Here the propagandist appeals to our hate and fear. He does this by giving "bad names" to those individuals, groups, nations, races, policies, practices, beliefs, and ideals that he would have us condemn and reject. For centuries the name "heretic" was bad. Thousands were oppressed, tortured, or put to death as heretics. Anybody who dissented from popular or group belief or practice was in danger of being called a heretic. In the light of today's knowledge, some heresies were bad and some were good. Many of the pioneers of modern science were called heretics; witness the cases of Copernicus, Galileo, Bruno. Today's bad names include: fascist, demagogue, dictator, red, financial oligarchy, communist, muck-raker, alien, outside agitator, economic royalist, utopian, rabble-rouser, trouble-maker, Tory, constitution wrecker.

"Al" Smith called Roosevelt a communist by implication when he said in his Liberty League speech, "There can be only one capital, Washington or Moscow." When Smith was running for the presidency many called him a tool of the pope, saying in effect, "We must choose between Washington and Rome." That implied that Smith, if elected president, would take his orders from the pope. Recently Justice Hugo Black has been associated with a bad name—Ku Klux Klan. In these cases propagandists have tried to make us form judgments without examining essential evidence and implications. "Al Smith is a Catholic. He must never be president." "Roosevelt is a red. Defeat his program." "Hugo Black is or was a Klansman. Take him out of the Supreme Court."

Use of bad names without presentation of their essential meaning, without all their pertinent implications, comprises perhaps the most common of all propaganda devices. Those who want to maintain the status quo apply bad names to those who would change it. For example: the Hearst press applies bad names to

communists and socialists. Those who want to change the status quo apply bad names to those who would maintain it. For example, the *Daily Worker* and the *American Guardian* apply bad names to conservative Republicans and Democrats.

Glittering Generalities

"Glittering generalities" is a device by which the propagandist identifies his program with virtue by use of "virtue words." Here he appeals to our emotions of love, generosity, and brotherhood. He uses words such as truth, freedom, honor, liberty, social justice, public service, the right to work, loyalty, progress, democracy, the American way, constitution defender. These words suggest shining ideals. All persons of good will believe in these ideals. Hence the propagandist, by identifying his individual group, nation, race, policy, practice, or belief with such ideals, seeks to win us to his cause. As name-calling is a device to make us form a judgment to reject and condemn, without examining the evidence, glittering generalities is a device to make us accept and approve, without examining the evidence.

For example, use of the phrases "the right to work" and "social justice" may be a device to make us accept programs for meeting the labor–capital problem which, if we examined them critically, we would not accept at all.

In the name-calling and glittering-generalities devices, words are used to stir up our emotions and to befog our thinking. In one device "bad words" are used to make us mad; in the other "good words" are used to make us glad.

The propagandist is most effective in the use of these devices when his words make us create devils to fight or gods to adore. By his use of the bad words, we personify as a "devil" some nation, race, group, individual, policy, practice, or ideal; we are made fighting mad to destroy it. By use of good words, we personify as a god-like idol some nation, race, group, and so on. Words that are bad to some are good to others, or may be made so. Thus, to some the New Deal is "a prophecy of social salvation" while to others it is "an omen of social disaster."

From consideration of names, "bad" and "good," we pass to institutions and symbols, also "bad" and "good." We see these in the next device.

Transfer

"Transfer" is a device by which the propagandist carries over the authority, sanction, and prestige of something we respect and revere to something he would have us accept. For example, most of us respect and revere our church and our nation. If the propagandist succeeds in getting church or nation to approve a campaign on behalf of some program, he thereby transfers its authority, sanction, and prestige to that program. Thus we may accept something that otherwise we might reject.

In the transfer device symbols are constantly used. The cross represents the Christian Church. The flag represents the nation. Cartoons such as Uncle Sam represent a consensus of public opinion. Those symbols stir emotions. At their

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very sight, with the speed of light, is aroused the whole complex of feelings we have with respect to church or nation. A cartoonist, by having Uncle Sam disapprove a budget for unemployment relief, would have us feel that the whole United States disapproves relief costs. By drawing an Uncle Sam who approves the same budget, the cartoonist would have us feel that the American people approve it. Thus, the transfer device is used both for and against causes and ideas.

Testimonial

The "testimonial" is a device to make us accept anything from a patent medicine or a cigarette to a program of national policy. In this device the propagandist makes use of testimonials. "When I feel tired, I smoke a Camel and get the grandest 'lift.'" "We believe the John Lewis plan of labor organization is splendid; C. I. O. should be supported." This device works in reverse also; counter-testimonials may be employed. Seldom are these used against commercial products such as patent medicines and cigarettes, but they are constantly employed in social, economic, and political issues. "We believe that the John Lewis plan of labor organization is bad; C. I. O. should not be supported."

Plain Folks

"Plain folks" is a device used by politicians, labor leaders, business men, and even by ministers and educators to win our confidence by appearing to be people just like ourselves—"just plain folks among the neighbors." In election years especially candidates show their devotion to little children and the common, homey things of life. They have front-porch campaigns. For the newspaper men they raid the kitchen cupboard, finding there some of the good wife's apple pie. They go to country picnics; they attend service at the old frame church; they pitch hay and go fishing; they show their belief in home and mother. In short, they would win our votes by showing that they're just as ordinary as the rest of us—"just plain folks"—and, therefore, wise and good. Business men are often "plain folks" with the factory hands. Even distillers use the device, "It's our family's whiskey, neighbor; and neighbor, it's your price."

Card-Stacking

"Card-stacking" is a device in which the propagandist employs all the arts of deception to win our support for himself, his group, nation, race, policy, practice, belief, or ideal. He stacks the cards against the truth. He uses under-emphasis and over-emphasis to dodge issues and evade facts. He resorts to lies, censorship, and distortion. He omits facts. He offers false testimony. He creates a smoke-screen of clamor by raising a new issue when he wants an embarrassing matter forgotten. He draws a red herring across the trail to confuse and divert those in quest of facts he does not want revealed. He makes the unreal appear real and the real

unreal. He lets half-truth masquerade as truth. By the card-stacking device, a mediocre candidate, through the "build-up," is made to appear an intellectual titan; an ordinary prize fighter a probable world champion; a worthless patent medicine a beneficent cure. By means of this device propagandists would convince us that a ruthless war of aggression is a crusade for righteousness. Some member nations of the Non-Intervention Committee send their troops to intervene in Spain. Card-stacking employs sham, hypocrisy, effrontery.

The Band Wagon

The "band wagon" is a device to make us follow the crowd, to accept the propagandist's program en masse. Here his theme is: "Everybody's doing it." His techniques range from those of medicine show to dramatic spectacle. He hires a hall, fills a great stadium, marches a million men in parade. He employs symbols, colors, music, movement, all the dramatic arts. He appeals to the desire, common to most of us, to "follow the crowd." Because he wants us to follow the crowd in masses, he directs his appeal to groups held together by common ties of nationality, religion, race, environment, sex, vocation. Thus propagandists campaigning for or against a program will appeal to us as Catholics, Protestants, or Jews; as members of the Nordic race or as Negroes; as farmers or as school teachers; as housewives or as miners. All the artifices of flattery are used to harness the fears and hatreds, prejudices and biases, convictions and ideals common to the group; thus emotion is made to push and pull the group on to the band wagon. In newspaper articles and in the spoken word this device is also found. "Don't throw your vote away. Vote for our candidate. He's sure to win." Nearly every candidate wins in every election — before the votes are in.

Propaganda and Emotion

Observe that in all these devices our emotion is the stuff with which propagandists work. Without it they are helpless; with it, harnessing it to their purposes, they can make us glow with pride or burn with hatred, they can make us zealots in behalf of the program they espouse. Propaganda as generally understood is expression of opinion or action by individuals or groups with reference to predetermined ends. Without the appeal to our emotion — to our fears and to our courage, to our selfishness and unselfishness, to our loves and to our hates — propagandists would influence few opinions and few actions.

To say this is not to condemn emotion, an essential part of life, or to assert that all predetermined ends of propagandists are "bad." What we mean is that the intelligent citizen does not want propagandists to utilize his emotions, even to the attainment of "good" ends, without knowing what is going on. He does not want to be "used" in the attainment of ends he may later consider "bad." He does not want to be gullible. He does not want to be fooled. He does not want to be duped, whether in a "good" cause. He wants to know the facts and among these is included

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Keeping in mind the seven common propaganda devices, turn to today's newspapers and almost immediately you can spot examples of them all. At election time or during any campaign, "plain folks" and "band wagon" are common. "Card-stacking" is hardest to detect because it is adroitly executed or because we lack the information necessary to nail the lie. A little practice with the daily newspapers in detecting these propaganda devices soon enables us to detect them elsewhere — in radio, newsreel, books, magazines, and in expressions of labor unions, business groups, churches, schools, political parties.

Questions

1. Considering the first and last sections of this piece, how would you express the Institute for Propaganda Analysis's attitude toward propaganda? Do you share its attitude? Explain.
2. Summarize each of the seven propaganda devices, and provide a contemporary example to illustrate each one.
3. In the final section of this essay, the authors define propaganda as "the expression of opinion or action by individuals or groups with reference to predetermined ends" (para. 16). Based on this definition, explain what propaganda is and what it is not. Use examples to illustrate your point.
4. Toward the end of this essay, the authors assert that their intent is "not to condemn emotion" (para. 17) but rather to help people understand how emotions are utilized in appeals made by advertisers, politicians, and others. Discuss a recent speech, public service announcement, or advertisement that appeals to emotions in a positive, not merely a manipulative, way.

2. *The Word Police*

Michiko Kakutani

Michiko Kakutani is a Pulitzer Prize–winning literary critic known for her book reviews in the *New York Times*. "The Word Police" appeared in the *New York Times* in January 1993.

This month's inaugural festivities, with their celebration, in Maya Angelou's words, of "humankind" — "the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jew / The African, the Native American, the Sioux, / The Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the Greek / The Irish, the Rabbi, the Priest, the Sheik, / The Gay, the Straight, the Preacher, / The privileged, the homeless, the Teacher" — constituted a kind of official embrace of multiculturalism and a new politics of inclusion.

The mood of political correctness, however, has already made firm inroads into popular culture. Washington boasts a store called Politically Correct that sells pro-whale, anti-meat, ban-the-bomb T-shirts, bumper stickers, and buttons

features interviews in the kitchen with representatives from groups like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

The Coppertone suntan lotion people are planning to give their longtime cover girl, Little Miss (Ms.?) Coppertone, a male equivalent, Little Mr. Coppertone. And even Superman (Superperson?) is rumored to be returning this spring, re-incarnated as four ethnically diverse clones: an African-American, an Asian, a Caucasian and a Latino.

Nowhere is this P.C. mood more striking than in the increasingly noisy debate over language that has moved from university campuses to the country at large—a development that both underscores Americans' puritanical zeal for reform and their unwavering faith in the talismanic power of words.

Certainly no decent person can quarrel with the underlying impulse behind political correctness: a vision of a more just, inclusive society in which racism, sexism, and prejudice of all sorts have been erased. But the methods and fervor of the self-appointed language police can lead to a rigid orthodoxy—and uninten-tional self-parody—opening the movement to the scorn of conservative oppo-nents and the mockery of cartoonists and late-night television hosts.

It's hard to imagine women earning points for political correctness by saying "ovarimony" instead of "testimony"—as one participant at the recent Modern Language Association convention was overheard to suggest. It's equally hard to imagine people wanting to flaunt their lack of prejudice by giving up such words and phrases as "bull market," "kaiser roll," "Lazy Susan," and "charley horse."

Several books on bias-free language have already appeared, and the 1991 edi-tion of the *Random House Webster's College Dictionary* boasts an appendix titled "Avoiding Sexist Language." The dictionary also includes such linguistic muta-tions as "womyn" (women, "used as an alternative spelling to avoid the suggestion of sexism perceived in the sequence m-e-n") and "waitron" (a gender-blind term for waiter or waitress).

Many of these dictionaries and guides not only warn the reader against offensive racial and sexual slurs, but also try to establish and enforce a whole new set of usage rules. Take, for instance, *The Bias-Free Word Finder, a Dictionary of Nondiscriminatory Language* by Rosalie Maggio (Beacon Press)—a volume often indistinguishable, in its meticulous solemnity, from the tongue-in-cheek *Official Politically Correct Dictionary and Handbook* put out last year by Henry Beard and Christopher Cerf (Villard Books). Ms. Maggio's book supplies the reader intent on using kinder, gentler language with writing guidelines as well as a detailed list-ing of more than 5,000 "biased words and phrases."

Whom are these guidelines for? Somehow one has a tough time picturing them replacing *Fowler's Modern English Usage* in the classroom, or being adopted by the average man (sorry, individual) in the street.

The "pseudogeneric 'he,'" we learn from Ms. Maggio, is to be avoided like the plague, as is the use of the word "man" to refer to humanity. "Fellow," "king," "lord" and "master" are bad because they're "male-oriented words," and "king," "lord"

society terms." The politically correct lion becomes the "monarch of the jungle," new-age children play "someone on the top of the heap," and the "Mona Lisa" goes down in history as Leonardo's "acme of perfection."

As for the word "black," Ms. Maggio says it should be excised from terms with a negative spin: she recommends substituting words like "mouse" for "black eye," "ostracize" for "blackball," "payola" for "blackmail" and "outcast" for "black sheep." Clearly, some of these substitutions work better than others: somehow the "sinis-ter humor" of Kurt Vonnegut or *Saturday Night Live* doesn't quite make it; nor does the "denouncing" of the Hollywood 10.[1]

For the dedicated user of politically correct language, all these rules can make for some messy moral dilemmas. Whereas "battered wife" is a gender-biased term, the gender-free term "battered spouse," Ms. Maggio notes, incorrectly implies "that men and women are equally battered."

On one hand, say Francine Wattman Frank and Paula A. Treichler in their book *Language, Gender, and Professional Writing* (Modern Language Associa-tion), "he or she" is an appropriate construction for talking about an individual (like a jockey, say) who belongs to a profession that's predominantly male—it's a way of emphasizing "that such occupations are not barred to women or that women's concerns need to be kept in mind." On the other hand, they add, using masculine pronouns rhetorically can underscore ongoing male dominance in those fields, implying the need for change.

And what about the speech codes adopted by some universities in recent years? Although they were designed to prohibit students from uttering sexist and racist slurs, they would extend, by logic, to blacks who want to use the word "nig-ger" to strip the term of its racist connotations, or homosexuals who want to use the word "queer" to reclaim it from bigots.

In her book, Ms. Maggio recommends applying bias-free usage retroactively: she suggests paraphrasing politically incorrect quotations, or replacing "the sexist words or phrases with ellpsis dots and/or bracketed substitutes," or using "*sic*" to show that the sexist words come from the original quotation and to call attention to the fact that they are incorrect."

Which leads the skeptical reader of *The Bias-Free Word Finder* to wonder whether "All the King's Men" should be retitled "All the Ruler's People"; "Pet Sem-etary," "Animal Companion Graves"; "Birdman of Alcatraz," "Birdperson of Alca-traz"; and "The Iceman Cometh," "The Ice Route Driver Cometh"?

Will making such changes remove the prejudice in people's minds? Should we really spend time trying to come up with non-male-based alternatives to "Midas touch," "Achilles' heel" and "Montezuma's revenge"? Will tossing out Santa Claus—whom Ms. Maggio accuses of reinforcing "the cultural male-as-norm system"—in favor of Belfana, his Italian female alter ego, truly help banish sexism? Can the avoidance of "violent expressions and metaphors" like "kill two

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[1]Actors and filmmakers blacklisted from making movies in the 1940s because they were alleg-

birds with one stone," "sock it to 'em" or "kick an idea around" actually promote a more harmonious world?

The point isn't that the excesses of the word police are comical. The point is that their intolerance (in the name of tolerance) has disturbing implications. In the first place, getting upset by phrases like "bullish on America" or "the City of Brotherly Love" tends to distract attention from the real problems of prejudice and injustice that exist in society at large, turning them into mere questions of semantics. Indeed, the emphasis currently put on politically correct usage has uncanny parallels with the academic movement of deconstruction—a method of textual analysis that focuses on language and linguistic pyrotechnics—which has become firmly established on university campuses.

In both cases, attention is focused on surfaces, on words and metaphors; in both cases, signs and symbols are accorded more importance than content. Hence, the attempt by some radical advocates to remove *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from curriculums on the grounds that Twain's use of the word "nigger" makes the book a racist text—never mind the fact that this American classic (written in 1884) depicts the spiritual kinship achieved between a white boy and a runaway slave, never mind the fact that the "nigger" Jim emerges as the novel's most honorable, decent character.

Ironically enough, the P.C. movement's obsession with language is accompanied by a strange Orwellian willingness to warp the meaning of words by placing them under a high-powered ideological lens. For instance, the *Dictionary of Cautionary Words and Phrases*—a pamphlet issued by the University of Missouri's Multicultural Management Program to help turn "today's journalists into tomorrow's multicultural newsroom managers"—warns that using the word "articulate" to describe members of a minority group can suggest the opposite, "that 'those people' are not considered well educated, articulate and the like."

The pamphlet patronizes minority groups, by cautioning the reader against using the words "lazy" and "burly" to describe any member of such groups; and it issues a similar warning against using words like "gorgeous" and "petite" to describe women.

As euphemism proliferates with the rise of political correctness, there is a spread of the sort of sloppy, abstract language that Orwell said is "designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind." "Fat" becomes "big boned" or "differently sized"; "stupid" becomes "exceptional"; "stoned" becomes "chemically inconvenienced."

Wait a minute here! Aren't such phrases eerily reminiscent of the euphemisms coined by the government during Vietnam and Watergate? Remember how the military used to speak of "pacification," or how President Richard M. Nixon's press secretary, Ronald L. Ziegler, tried to get away with calling a lie an "inoperative statement"?

Calling the homeless "the underhoused" doesn't give them a place to live; calling the poor "the economically marginalized" doesn't help them pay the bills.

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Rather, by playing down their plight, such language might even make it easier to shrug off the seriousness of their situation.

Instead of allowing free discussion and debate to occur, many gung-ho advocates of politically correct language seem to think that simple suppression of a word or concept will magically make the problem disappear. In *The Bias-Free Word Finder*, Ms. Maggio entreats the reader not to perpetuate the negative stereotype of Eve. "Be extremely cautious in referring to the biblical Eve," she writes; "this story has profoundly contributed to negative attitudes toward women throughout history, largely because of misogynistic and patriarchal interpretations that labeled her evil, inferior, and seductive."

The story of Bluebeard, the rake (whoops!—the libertine) who killed his seven wives, she says, is also to be avoided, as is the biblical story of Jezebel. Of Jesus Christ, Ms. Maggio writes: "There have been few individuals in history as completely androgynous as Christ, and it does his message a disservice to overinsist on his maleness." She doesn't give the reader any hints on how this might be accomplished; presumably, one is supposed to avoid describing him as the Son of God.

Of course the P.C. police aren't the only ones who want to proscribe what people should say or give them guidelines for how they may use an idea; Jesse Helms and his supporters are up to exactly the same thing when they propose to patrol the boundaries of the permissible in art. In each case, the would-be censor aspires to suppress what he or she finds distasteful—all, of course, in the name of the public good.

In the case of the politically correct, the prohibition of certain words, phrases and ideas is advanced in the cause of building a brave new world free of racism and hate, but this vision of harmony clashes with the very ideals of diversity and inclusion that the multicultural movement holds dear, and it's purchased at the cost of freedom of expression and freedom of speech.

In fact, the utopian world envisioned by the language police would be bought at the expense of the ideas of individualism and democracy articulated in "The Gettysburg Address": "Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

Of course, the P.C. police have already found Lincoln's words hopelessly "phallocentric." No doubt they would rewrite the passage: "Fourscore and seven years ago our foremothers and forefathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, formulated with liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all humankind is created equal."

Questions

1. Michiko Kakutani opens with a reference to the poem "On the Pulse of Morning" that Maya Angelou read at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton. Why does she connect a poem and an event that illustrate the "politics of inclusion" (para. 1) to the "mood of political correctness" (para. 2)?

2. What does she mean by "the increasingly noisy debate over language" that "both underscores Americans' puritanical zeal for reform and their unwavering faith in the talismanic power of words" (para. 4)?

3. By using the term "language police" (para. 5), what attitude does Kakutani convey toward political correctness? Do you find the term appropriate? Explain why or why not.

4. Kakutani states her argument about language and political correctness most emphatically in the final paragraphs of the essay. What tension does she develop? To what extent do you agree with her?

3. *Nonviolent Language*

NORTH YORK WOMEN TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION

The following language guidelines appeared in a brochure written for elementary teachers in Ontario. The guidelines were reprinted in *Harper's* magazine in February 1995.

VIOLENT PHRASE	ALTERNATIVE
Kill two birds with one stone	Get two for the price of one
There's more than one way to skin a cat	There are different ways to solve a problem
Take a stab at it	Go for it!
Get away with murder	Avoid consequences
It's an uphill battle	It's next to impossible
You're dead meat	You're in serious trouble
Kick it around	Consider the options
That's a low blow	That's outside the rules
Hit them where it hurts	Find their vulnerability
Crash the party	Show up anyway
Shoot yourself in the foot	Undermine your own position
Hit the computer key	Press the computer key
Blown out of the water	Reduced to nothing

Questions

1. Which of these "violent phrase[s]" do you find offensive and thus in need of change? Which do you find foolish or silly?

2. Which of the alternatives would you say most change the meaning of the origina phrase?

3. This list was suggested by a Canadian organization of teachers. Explain why yo think it would or would not be taken seriously in the United States.

4. Most of these phrases are slang or clichés. What phrases in common parlanc today might be considered "violent" and thus offensive?

4. *NCAA Native American Mascots*

MIKE LESTER

The following cartoon by Mike Lester, cartoonist for the *Rome News-Tribune* ir Georgia, appeared in 2005. It refers to the National College Athletic Associa tion's position on the use of Native American names for sports teams and thei mascots.

(See insert for color version.)

Questions

1. What is the setting of Mike Lester's cartoon? Why is it important to his subject?

2. How does the written text contribute to the cartoon's message?

3. What point is Lester making? What role does irony play in making the point?

4. What are at least two different ways to interpret the point Lester is making in this cartoon?
5. Do you find this cartoon persuasive? Humorous? Insightful? Explain your response.

5. *The -Ism Schism: How Much Wallop Can a Simple Word Pack?*

GEOFFREY NUNBERG

In the following *New York Times* editorial, Geoffrey Nunberg, a senior researcher and linguistics professor at Stanford University, examines the history and use of the word *terror* and its derivatives.

"The long-term defeat of terror will happen when freedom takes hold in the broader Middle East," President Bush said on June 28, [2004], as he announced the early transfer of sovereignty to the Iraqis.

The "defeat of terror"—the working suggests that much has changed since Sept. 11, 2001. In his speech on that day, Mr. Bush said, "We stand together to win the war against terrorism," and over the following year in the White House described the enemy as terrorism twice as often as terror. But in White House speeches over the past year, those proportions have been reversed. And the shift from "terrorism" to "terror" has been equally dramatic in major newspapers, according to a search of several databases.

Broad linguistic shifts like those usually owe less to conscious decisions by editors or speechwriters than to often unnoticed changes in the way people perceive their world. Terrorism may itself be a vague term, as critics have argued. But terror is still more amorphous and elastic, and alters the understanding not just of the enemy but of the war against it.

True, phrases like "terror plots" or "terror threat level" can make terror seem merely a headline writer's shortening of the word terrorism. But even there, "terror" draws on a more complex set of meanings. It evokes both the actions of terrorists and the fear they are trying to engender.

"Do we cower in the face of terror?" Mr. Bush asked on Irish television a few days before the handover in Iraq, with terror doing double work.

And unlike "terrorism," "terror" can be applied to states as well as to insurgent groups, as in the President's frequent references to Saddam Hussein's "terror regime." Even if Mr. Hussein can't actually be linked to the attacks of Sept. 11, "terror" seems to connect them etymologically.

The modern senses of "terror" and "terrorism" reach back to a single historical moment: "la Terreur," Robespierre's Reign of Terror in 1793 and 1794.

"Terror," Robespierre said, "is nothing other than justice, prompt, severe, inflexible, it is therefore an emanation of virtue."

It was the ruthless severity of that emanation that moved Edmund Burke to decry "those hell-hounds called terrorists," in one of the first recorded uses of "terrorist" in English.

For Robespierre and his contemporaries, "terror" conveyed the exalted emotion people may feel when face to face with the absolute. That was what led Albert Camus to describe terror as the urge that draws people to the violent certainties of totalitarianism, where rebellion hardens into ideology.

With time, though, the word's aura of sublimity faded. By 1880, "holy terror" was only a jocular name for an obstreperous child and "terrible" no longer suggested the sense of awe it had in "terrible swift sword." By the Jazz Age, "terrific" was just a wan superlative. Terror was still a name for intense fear, but it no longer connoted a social force.

"Terrorism," too, has drifted since its origin. By modern times, the word could refer only to the use of violence against a government, not on its behalf—though some still claimed the "terrorist" designation proudly, like the Russian revolutionaries who assassinated Czar Alexander II in 1881 and the Zionist Stern Gang (later the Lehi), which, in the 1940's used assassination and other violent means in hopes of driving the British occupiers out of Palestine.

It wasn't until the beginning of the post-colonial period that all groups rejected the terrorist label in favor of names like freedom fighters or mujahadeen. By then, "terrorism" was no longer a genuine -ism, but the name for a reprehensible strategy, often extended as a term of abuse for anyone whose methods seemed ruthless.

But the recent uses of "terror" seem to draw its disparate, superseded senses back together in a way that Burke might have found familiar. Today, it is again a name that encompasses both the dark forces that threaten "civilization" and the fears they arouse.

The new senses of the noun are signaled in another linguistic shift in the press and in White House speeches. Just as "terrorism" has been replaced by "terror," so "war" is much more likely now to be followed by "on" rather than "against."

That "war on" pattern dates from the turn of the 20th century, when people adapted epidemiological metaphors like "the war on typhus" to describe campaigns against social evils like alcohol, crime and poverty—endemic conditions that could be mitigated but not eradicated. Society may declare a war on drugs or drunken driving, but no one expects total victory.

"The war on terror," too, suggests a campaign aimed not at human adversaries but at a pervasive social plague. At its most abstract, terror comes to seem as persistent and inexplicable as evil itself, without raising any inconvenient theological qualms. And in fact, the White House's use of "evil" has declined by 80 percent over the same period that its use of "terror" has been increasing.

Like wars on ignorance and crime, a "war on terror" suggests an enduring state of struggle—a "never ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts," as Camus put it in *The Plague*, his 1947 allegory on the rise and fall of Fascism. It is as if the language is girding itself for the long haul.

Questions

1. What is Geoffrey Nunberg's main point?
2. What is Nunberg's purpose in offering a historical perspective on the word *terror* and its derivatives?
3. What allusions does Nunberg make? What is the effect of these allusions?
4. Why does Nunberg include the analysis of "war *on*" versus "war *against*"? Do you see the analysis as peripheral or essential to his discussion of terror? Explain why.
5. Is Nunberg being critical of George W. Bush by using examples from his speeches? Cite specific passages to support your opinion.

6. *The War of the Words: A Dispatch from the Front Lines*

Daniel Okrent

In the following 2005 article, Daniel Okrent, then public editor of the *New York Times*, discusses the use of *terrorist* and *terrorism* in the *Times* and the language used to report news from the Middle East.

Nothing provokes as much rage as what many perceive to be the *Times*'s policy on the use of "terrorist," "terrorism" and "terror." There is no policy, actually, but except in the context of Al Qaeda, or in direct quotations, these words, as explosive as what they describe, show up very rarely.

Among pro-Israeli readers (and nonreaders urged to write to me by media watchdog organizations), the controversy over variants of the T-word has become the stand-in for the Israel-Palestine conflict itself. When Israel's targeted assassinations of suspected sponsors of terrorism provoke retaliation, some pro-Palestinian readers argue that any armed response against civilians by such groups as Hamas is morally equivalent. Critics on the other side say the *Times*'s general avoidance of the word "terrorism" is a political decision, and exactly what Hamas wants.

Here's what I want: A path out of this thicket, which is snarled with far more than "terror" and its derivative tendrils. I packed the preceding paragraph with enough verbal knots to secure the QE2, so I'll untangle them one by one.

"Pro-Israeli" and "pro-Palestinian": Adem Carroll of the Islamic Circle of North America has pointed out to me that both epithets represent value judgments. Are Ariel Sharon's policies pro-Israel? Not in the minds of his critics on the Israeli left. Is Mahmoud Abbas's negotiation policy pro-Palestinian? I doubt that supporters of Islamic jihad believe it is.

"Israel-Palestine conflict": I've heard from ardent Zionists who deplore this usage because, they say, "There is no Palestine."

"Targeted assassinations": The Israel Defense Forces use this term; Palestinians believe it implicitly exonerates Israel for the deaths of nearby innocents. The *Times* tries to avoid it, but an editor's attempt at a substitute on Jan. 27 [2005] — "pinpoint killings" — was even more accepting of the Israeli line.

"Settlers": Are they merely settlers when they carry out armed actions against Palestinians?

"Groups such as Hamas": According to the European Union and the United States government, which are both cited regularly by an army of readers, Hamas is a terrorist organization. According to *Times* deputy foreign editor Ethan Bronner: "We use 'terrorist' sparingly because it is a loaded word. Describing the goals or acts of a group often serves readers better than repeating the term 'terrorist.' We make clear that Hamas seeks the destruction of Israel through violence but that it is also a significant political and social force among Palestinians, fielding candidates and clinics and day care centers." According to many *Times* critics, that just won't do.

There was one more bugbear in that overloaded paragraph up top: "Media watchdog organizations." That's what you call the noble guardians on your side; the other guy's dishonest advocates are "pressure groups." Both are accurate characterizations, but trying to squeeze them into the same sentence can get awfully clumsy. It's also clumsy to befog clear prose by worrying over words so obsessively that strong sentences get ground into grits. But closing one's ears to the complaints of partisans would also entail closing one's mind to the substance of their arguments.

The Armed Conflict in the Area Between Lebanon and Egypt may yield the most linguistically volatile issues confronting *Times* editors, but I've encountered a ferocious tug-of-war between advocates of each of the following as well: Genital mutilation vs. genital cutting ("would you call ritual male circumcision 'genital mutilation'?"). Liberal vs. moderate ("you're simply trying to make liberalism look reasonable and inoffensive" as in calling Michael Bloomberg a "moderate Republican"). Abuse vs. torture ("if the Abu Ghraib victims had been American soldiers," the *Times* "would have described it as torture"). Partial birth vs. intact dilation and extraction (the use of the former demonstrates that the *Times* "has embraced the terminology of anti-abortion forces"). "Iraqi forces" vs. "American-backed forces" ("aren't the Sunni insurgents Iraqis?"). Don't get me started on "insurgents," much less homeless vs. vagrant, affirmative action vs. racial preferences, or loophole vs. tax incentive.

Now a rugby scrum has gathered around the Bush Social Security plan. Republicans tout "personal accounts"; Democrats trash "private accounts." In this atmosphere, I don't think reporters have much choice other than to use "private" and "personal" interchangeably, and to interchange them often. Once one side of an ideological conflict has seized control of a word, it no longer has a meaning of its own; opting for one or the other would be a declaration that doesn't belong in the news reports.

Hijacking the language proves especially pernicious when government officials deodorize their programs with near-Orwellian euphemism. (If Orwell were writing "Politics and the English Language" today, he'd need a telephone book to contain his "catalog of swindles and perversions.") The Bush administration has been especially good at this; just count the number of times self-anointing phrases like "Patriot Act," "Clear Skies Act" or "No Child Left Behind Act" appear in the *Times*, at each appearance sounding as wholesome as a hymn. Even the most committed Republicans must recognize that such phrases could apply to measures guaranteeing the opposite of what they claim to accomplish.

When the next Democratic administration rolls around, Republicans will likely discover how it feels to be on the losing side of a propaganda war. (The Clinton White House wasn't very good at this: somehow, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, which remade federal welfare policy, never hit the top of the charts.)

The *Times* shouldn't play along. If the sports section calls the Orange Bowl the Orange Bowl, even if its formal name is the Federal Express Orange Bowl, why can't the news pages refer to the Public Education Act of 2002, or the Industrial Emissions Act of 2005? Similarly, editors could ban the use of "reform" as a description of legislative action. It's even worse than "moderate," something so benign in tone and banal in substance that it can be used to camouflage any depredations its sponsors propose. Who could oppose health care reform, Social Security reform or welfare reform, and who could tell me what any of them means? You could call the rule barring (or at least radically limiting) the use of these shameless beards the Save the Language Act.

Of course, reform of the use of "reform," or a consistent assault on any of the linguistic cosmetics used by politicians and interest groups to disfigure public debate, could bring on charges of bias (a word which itself has almost come to mean "something I disagree with").

But I think in some instances the *Times*'s earnest effort to avoid bias can desiccate language and dilute meaning. In a January memo to the foreign desk, former Jerusalem bureau chief James Bennet addressed the paper's gingerly use of the word "terrorism."

"The calculated bombing of students in a university cafeteria, or of families gathered in an ice cream parlor, cries out to be called what it is," he wrote. "I wanted to avoid the political meaning that comes with 'terrorism,' but I couldn't pretend that the word had no usage at all in plain English." Bennet came to believe that "not to use the term began to seem like a political act in itself."

I agree. While some Israelis and their supporters assert that any Palestinian holding a gun is a terrorist, there can be neither factual nor moral certainty that he is. But if the same man fires into a crowd of civilians, he has committed an act of terror, and he is a terrorist. My own definition is simple: an act of political violence committed against purely civilian targets is terrorism; attacks on military targets are not. The deadly October 2000 assault on the American destroyer

Cole or the devastating suicide bomb that killed 18 American soldiers and 4 Iraqis in Mosul last December may have been heinous, but these were acts of war, not terrorism. Beheading construction workers in Iraq and bombing a market in Jerusalem are terrorism pure and simple.

Given the word's history as a virtual battle flag over the past several years, it would be tendentious for the *Times* to require constant use of it, as some of the paper's critics are insisting. But there's something uncomfortably fearful, and inevitably self-defeating, about struggling so hard to avoid it.

7. *Letters to the Editor in Response to* The War of the Words

Following is a series of letters to Daniel Okrent in response to his article "The War of the Words."

Re "The War of the Words: A Dispatch from the Front Lines" (March 6):

The right definition of terrorism is "acts of war by nongovernmental organizations." But the fact that this is the only definition that matches both intent and usage is irrelevant. "Terrorism" has no agreed-upon definition. We should therefore drop the use of the term. Palestinian bus bombers should be called "bus bombers." Hamas should be called a "quasi-military group." The attack on New York and Washington by Al Qaeda should be called an "attack."

— WARREN SELTZER, *Jerusalem, March 6, 2005*

You write: "The deadly October 2000 assault on the American destroyer *Cole* or the devastating suicide bomb that killed 18 American soldiers and 4 Iraqis in Mosul last December may have been heinous, but these were acts of war, not terrorism."

The bombing of the *Cole* was an "act of war"? Isn't war a conflict between legitimate governments, adhering to certain universally agreed-upon "rules"? As far as I know, no government declared war against the United States by attacking the *Cole*, just as no government declared war by attacking the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

— CATHLEEN MEDWICK, *Somers, N.Y., March 6, 2005*

Supporters of Israel's policies have long dominated this war of words in the American news media. Otherwise, you and your colleagues might be debating whether to use "settlers" or "colonists" for the inhabitants of Israeli enclaves in the occupied territories: the former implies that they moved into uninhabited territory; the latter that someone else might already have been living there. Use of "colonists" brings charges of anti-Semitism, however, while "settlers," which is at least equally partisan, is widely treated as a neutral descriptive term.

Journalists at the *New York Times* will never satisfy everyone when writing about the Middle East. But trying not to ruffle feathers should take a back seat to accuracy and clarity.

—Robert Dimit, *New York, March 6, 2005*

Regarding the phrasing "Israel-Palestine conflict," you write, "I've heard from ardent Zionists who deplore this usage because they say, 'There is no Palestine.'" You failed to mention that most Palestinians, and other Arabs for that matter, say, "There is no Israel."

—Shlomo Singer, *New York, March 6, 2005*

You call terrorism "an act of political violence committed against purely civilian targets." By this definition the British and American bombing of Dresden was terrorism, as was the fire-bombing of Tokyo and the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. (Almost no one argues there was military value to these targets.) These were attacks meant to change people's minds by invoking fear. The same can be said for the German attacks on London, which were clearly aimed at the will of the British people. And, if you accept the argument that these attacks were military because they forced the diversion of military forces to stop them, then any civilian attack becomes a military one.

—John A. Kroll, *Tarpon Springs, Fla., March 6, 2005*

Terrorism is the intentional harming of innocent civilians for political purposes. The *Times* should have the courage to use this term correctly, consistently and as often (or seldom) as the facts require. Let the political chips fall where they may.

—John Tomasi, *Providence, March 6, 2005*
The writer is an associate professor of political science at Brown University.

Questions

1. In his article, how does Daniel Okrent fulfill his duty as a commentator on journalistic issues? Does he offer information and interpretation objectively? If so, how?
2. What is Okrent's main argument? Does it transcend the specific case of Israel and Palestine, or does it apply only to that conflict? Explain your response.
3. Okrent uses many metaphors and analogies. Identify three, and comment on their individual effectiveness. Then consider the overall effectiveness of Okrent's use of figurative language.
4. What does Okrent mean when he writes, "Hijacking the language proves especially pernicious when government officials deodorize their programs with near-Orwellian euphemism" (para. 12)? Try rewriting that sentence with entirely literal language—no metaphors and no allusions allowed.
5. What objections do the letters to the editor raise? Paraphrase at least three of them.

8. from *Words That Work*

Frank Luntz

Dr. Frank Luntz is a political consultant specializing in the use of polling and focus groups to effectively shape messages. The following selection comes from his 2007 book *Words That Work*.

Sometimes it is not what you say that matters but what you *don't* say. Other times, a single word or phrase can undermine or destroy the credibility of an otherwise successful pitch or presentation. Effective communication requires that you *stop* saying words and phrases that undermine your ability to educate the American people.

This memo is adopted from a document I originally prepared and presented to Republican congressional spouses in January 2005.

NEVER SAY	INSTEAD SAY
Global economy	Free market economy
Globalization	
Capitalism	

More Americans are afraid of "*globalization*" than even "*privatization.*" The reason? "*Globalization*" represents something big, something distant, and something foreign. We distrust "*globalization*" for the same reason we like our local government but dislike Washington—the closer you are, the more control you have. So instead of talking about the principles of "*globalization,*" instead emphasize "*the value and benefits of a free market economy.*" True, blue collar and manufacturing audiences probably won't like any terminology you use—to them, anything global is a direct threat to their personal employment.

Similarly, "*capitalism*" reminds people of harsh economic competition that yields losers as well as winners, while "*the free market economy*" provides opportunity to all and allows everyone to succeed. And here's one more economic label: "*Small business owner*" is looked at more favorably than "*entrepreneur,*" even though people think the latter occupation is more financially successful. The difference? A "*small business owner*" is perceived to use her own money, her own skills, and her own sweat to build a business (the gender reference is correct—more women than men are small business owners), while "*entrepreneurs*" are more like speculators who benefit from other people's money and effort.

NEVER SAY	INSTEAD SAY
Foreign trade	International trade

For many reasons unrelated to this specific issue, the word "*foreign*" conjures up negative images in the minds of many Americans. We simply don't like "*foreign*

oil" or "*foreign products*" or "*foreign nationals.*" Even though we are truly a nation of foreigners, we have grave concerns about the motives of foreigners—and that concern has only increased since 9/11. "*International*" is a more positive concept than either "*foreign*" or "*global*" not because of anything positive but because it doesn't come wrapped with all the negative connotations.

In the early days of CNN, network founder Ted Turner forbade anyone to say "foreign" on the air. After all, CNN was an international network and what was "foreign" to one person was likely home to another. The punishment for saying "foreign" rather than "international" was a $50 fine.

NEVER SAY	INSTEAD SAY
Undocumented workers/aliens	Illegal immigrants
	Border security

This linguistic distinction may prove to be the political battle of the decade. The label used to describe those who enter America illegally determines the attitudes people have toward them. Those supportive of a guest worker program that would allow illegal immigrants to remain in the country tend to label these people "*undocumented workers*" because it suggests legitimate employees who simply don't have the right paperwork, while those who want to deport these same individuals use the term "*illegal aliens*" because alien has the most negative connotations.

And instead of addressing "*immigration reform,*" which polarizes Americans, you should be talking about "*border security*" issues. Securing our borders and our people has universal support.

NEVER SAY	INSTEAD SAY
Drilling for oil	Exploring for energy

I have been involved in an entire language creation effort involving environmental issues, some of which is included in this book. But the one phrase that stands out more than any other is in some ways an energy issue rather than an environmental concern. "*Drilling for oil*" causes people to paint a picture in their minds of an old-fashioned oil rig that gushes up black goop. "*Exploring for energy*" conjures a picture of twenty-first-century technology and innovation that "*responsibly harvests energy*" and provides us the ability to heat our homes and drive our cars. When you talk about energy, use words such as "*efficient*" and "*balanced,*" and always express concern for the environment.

NEVER SAY	INSTEAD SAY
School choice	Parental choice
	Equal opportunity in education
Vouchers	Opportunity scholarships

Thanks to an effective advertising campaign by national and state teacher unions, Americans remain at best evenly split over whether they support "*school*

choice.*" But they are heavily in favor of "*giving parents the right to choose th schools that are right for their children,*" and there is almost universal support fo "*equal opportunity in education.*"

"*Vouchers,*" seen as depriving public schools of necessary dollars, have ever less support than the principle of school choice. However, "*opportunity scholar ships*" do have widespread backing, as they are perceived to be a reward for goo students to get a good education. Here again, the words you use determine th support you will receive. . . .

NEVER SAY	INSTEAD SAY
Deny	Not give

Yes, the two phrases mean exactly the same thing and yield exactly the sam result. But "*to deny*" implies that you are preventing someone from receivin something they are entitled to, while "*not to give*" suggests it was only a choice.

Questions

1. This memo was directed to the spouses of members of Congress—not the electe officials. What is the importance of this audience to the content Frank Luntz i explaining?
2. What is the difference between euphemisms and Luntz's recommendations?
3. Use the logic of Luntz. Imagine that a political client's staff has just hired you t help determine whether they should use the term "climate change" or "glob warming" in their campaign. Depending on their political leanings, explain wh they should choose one or the other.
4. Luntz writes: "The label used to describe those who enter America illegally deter mines the attitudes people have toward them" (para. 7). Do you think this state ment about labels is true about any group, not just "those who enter Americ illegally"? Explain.
5. Develop your own list of at least three examples of what you should "never say" ver sus what you should "say instead" in a job application, on a date, or in a college essa

Making Connections

1. How might the Institute for Propaganda Analysis respond to Daniel Okrent assertion that "the *Times*'s earnest effort to avoid bias can desiccate languag and dilute meaning" (para. 16)?
2. Is the main point made by Michiko Kakutani more like the one Okrent o Frank Luntz makes? Explain your response.
3. Which examples, if any, of the suggestions made in "Nonviolent Language would Kakutani likely approve of? Why?