

Chapter Two -Language and Critical Thinking

“ . . . in our time,
political speech and writing
are largely the defense of the indefensible.”
--George Orwell

“If I turn out to be particularly clear,
you’ve probably misunderstood what I’ve said.”
--Alan Greenspan

Human beings have been using language for thousands of years. One would think that by now we would have no trouble communicating clearly. Experience demonstrates otherwise. What’s worse, some people are often intentionally unclear. They use language to conceal the truth, to mislead, confuse, or deceive us. They do not use language to communicate ideas or feelings; they use it to control thought and behavior. Manipulation, not communication, is their goal. In this chapter, we will explore several common verbal tricks and deceptions used by an array of manipulators, including advertisers, political hucksters, evangelists, sales persons and talk show hosts. We will also describe several key features of clear and effective communication.

We’ll begin by examining two of the more interesting features of language: *how words can stimulate thought and action by **arousing** feelings*, and *how words can **fail** to arouse thought or action by **failing** to arouse any feelings*.

1. Emotive and cognitive meanings

Detergents are called *Joy* or *Cheer*, not *Dreary*, *Tedious* or *Boring*. Consumer products are touted as being *new*, *improved*, *new and improved*, *fresh*, *clean*, *pure*, *better*, *great*, *light*, *natural*, *healthy*, etc. Why? Because of the positive feeling conveyed by those terms.

Why, when one wants to arouse disgust and displeasure with another person’s ideas, does one call him a “Nazi” or a “murderer of innocent babies” and compare him to Hitler? Because of the negative feeling conveyed by those terms and the name “Hitler.”

What is the difference between a *call girl*, a *prostitute*, a *whore*, a *streetwalker*, and a *sex industry worker*? The *emotive meaning* of each term differs. “Call girl” expresses less disapproval or negative feeling than does “prostitute,” which in turn expresses less negative feeling than “whore.” “Sex industry worker” expresses the least emotive content, which may be why the county of Sacramento uses that expression to refer to its *streetwalkers*.

What is the difference between an *erotic film* and a *pornographic movie*? Or between *ethnic cleansing* and genocide, or between *murdering* and *terminating with extreme prejudice*? What is the difference between a *domestic dispute* and *wife battering* or between a *pro-life activist* and an *anti-abortion terrorist*? The difference is primarily in the **emotive meanings** of the different terms in each pair.

When I studied history, I learned about the *Holy Crusades*. I wonder if Muslims studied the *Infidel Invasions*? For over a quarter of a century, murders, bombings, assassinations and other horrors in Northern Ireland have been referred to as *The Troubles*, an expression with little emotive content.

If you are hired to come up with the name of a new automobile, you will not keep your job for long if you suggest *Ford Tortoise* or *Dodge Snail*. Your golf ball company will go bankrupt if you name your ball the *Titleist Slice* or *the Prostaff Hook*. The names must suggest something positive, not negative. In the case of autos, the names must suggest speed or power or status, etc., but not slowness or sluggishness. In the case of golf balls, the name must suggest distance or accuracy or status, but not one of the horrors of golf, such as the *Starburst Shank*.

The **cognitive content** is the literal sense or reference of a word or expression. One news reporter referred to “female circumcision” when describing a practice a woman from West Africa did not want to undergo. Another reporter described the practice as “genital mutilation.” Who was right? Cognitively, both were. Emotively? Well, that depends on your attitude toward the practice.

Why did President Jimmy Carter refer to the failed mission to rescue American hostages in Teheran, Iran, as “an incomplete success?” Why do government agents refer to civilians killed by military bombs as “collateral damage” or to murders and assassinations as “unlawful deprivation of life?” *Because these terms express very little feeling.* Why use words that have little emotive content? Because you and I generally respond only to things we care about. If words or images or actions arouse no feelings in us, we are not likely to respond to them. If we do not respond to them, we will not

think about them. If we do not think about them, we will not do anything about them. If we do not do anything about them, then those in power can continue doing whatever they wish to. Even if they do not have our consent, they do not arouse our opposition either.

At the other extreme of using dull, non-emotive language to prevent us from responding and thinking about unpleasant realities, there are those who use language primarily for its emotive power. They use words that function like the names of detergents or mass murderers: words that primarily or exclusively convey feelings, words that have little or no **cognitive content**. For example, a letter I received from the National Right to Life Committee attempts to arouse emotions with many references to *killing* “innocent” or “defenseless” *unborn babies*.” The letter refers to the National Abortion Rights Action League, Planned Parenthood, and the National Organization of Women (NOW) as “pro-death groups.”

Many words and expressions convey nothing more than a positive or negative attitude. Words such as *lovely*, *wonderful*, *good*, *great* and *beautiful* usually are used to express approval. Such words are said to have **positive emotive content**. Words such as *disgusting*, *despicable*, *bad*, *stupid* and *ugly* are used usually to express disapproval. Such words are said to have a **negative emotive content**. Some words, such as *tangent* and *neutrino*, have no emotive content; they are not used to express an attitude, but are used solely for their **descriptive** or **cognitive content**.

HOW TO TELL A BUSINESSMAN FROM A BUSINESSWOMAN

A businessman is assertive; a businesswoman is pushy.
 A businessman is meticulous; she is picky.
 He loses his temper; she's bitchy.
 He gets depressed; she's moody.
 He's persistent; she's hysterical.
 He's confident or self-assured; she's arrogant.
 He's a loner; she's aloof.
 He's firm; she's stubborn.
 He's assertive; she's mouthy.
 He's a private person; she's secretive.
 He makes quick decisions; she's impulsive.
 He's only human; she's emotional.

A difference in attitude explains why different terms are used to describe the same behavior of men and women, a difference usually described by the highly emotive term, “sexism.”

Many words, however, are used to express both a cognitive and an emotive meaning; their function is not only to describe something or convey information, but to express an attitude about it as well. For example, what one person might call “a barbaric and savage slaying,” another might refer to simply as “a homicide.” Their different attitudes are expressed by their different choice of words, though their cognitive meaning is identical (both expressions describe the murder of a human being).

Those in the business of persuading others to accept ideas or values, or to buy products or vote for candidates, must know how to select words and pictures that are likely to evoke emotional responses. They know the power of **loaded** language, i.e., **highly emotive language aimed at evoking a response through emotions such as fear and hope, rather than through thought**. As one anti-abortion advocate put it: just put together the words “baby” and “kill”--no one can resist that!

Exercises 2-1

A. The following words are likely to have no emotive content in most contexts. For each word, find two synonyms, one with a negative and one with a positive emotive content. (A thesaurus would be useful in doing this exercise.) See chapter 10 for answers to those with asterisks (*).

- | | | | |
|--------------|----------------|-------------------|-----------|
| 1. arbitrary | *2. old | 3. indelicacy | |
| 4. detain | 5. review | 6. undisturbed | |
| *7. plan | 8. altercation | 9. move (someone) | *10. take |

B. The following words are usually used with positive or negative emotive content. For each word, find a synonym that would probably have no little or no emotive content in most contexts.

- | | | | |
|-------------|---------------|-------------|----------------|
| *1. stink | 2. remarkable | 3. pitiless | |
| *4. shy | 5. chastise | *6. murder | |
| 7. pathetic | 8. incoherent | 9. inspire | 10. inadequacy |

C. Bertrand Russell devised what he called “irregular conjugations” of words. The idea is to find three words with nearly the same cognitive meaning, but with emotive contents that get increasingly negative or positive. For example, “I am firm, you are obstinate, he is pig-headed.” Or, “She is introverted, he is shy, and I am the strong, silent type. Or, “I’m a free spirit, she’s a nymphomaniac, you’re a slut.”

Invent three irregular conjugations of your own, using words other than those in exercises A and B above.

D. Write a short commercial, advertisement or political speech in which you select at least six words or expressions primarily for their emotive content, disregarding any vagueness in their cognitive contents.

E. Rewrite a newspaper article, giving it a different slant and tone by replacing several words with synonyms which convey a more negative or more positive emotive meaning.

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2. Doublespeak

In his essay “Politics and the English Language,” George Orwell claimed that the “mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristic of modern English prose, and especially of any kind of political writing.” People have to think less if they use vague or stale language, he said, and “this reduced state of consciousness, if not indispensable, is at any rate favorable to political con-

formity.” According to Orwell, political speech is “largely the defense of the indefensible” and thus “political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness.” As examples, Orwell cited the following terms and their real meanings: *pacification* really meant the bombing of defenseless villages and machine-gunning cattle; *transfer of population* really meant the forcing of millions of peasants to take to the roads while their farms were confiscated; and, *elimination of unreliable elements* really meant that people were imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck.

Orwell reminds us that a critical thinker must be on guard not only against language which intentionally obscures thought by arousing emotions, but also against more subtle abuses of language: using **euphemisms, jargon, and obscure language** to deceive and mislead. Such language is called **double-speak**. It is described by William Lutz as language which “makes the bad seem good, the negative appear positive, the unpleasant appear attractive or at least tolerableIt is language that conceals or prevents thought” (Lutz 1989, 1).¹ Lutz identifies several kinds of doublespeak. One type uses **euphemisms** to mislead or deceive us about an ugly reality or embarrassing situation. Another uses **pretentious, inflated, obscure or esoteric jargon** to give an air of prestige, profundity, or authority to one’s speech or to hide ugly realities or embarrassing matters.²

Another kind of doublespeak, which Lutz does not label but which ought to be mentioned, is the **false implication: clear and accurate language which implies something false**. For example, there is a false implication in the expression “no cholesterol” on the front of a potato chip package whose ingredients (clearly listed on the back of the package) include saturated fats, which are converted to cholesterol when eaten. You will not be ingesting cholesterol when you eat the chips, but you will be increasing the cholesterol in your body nevertheless.

2.1 Euphemisms

Euphemisms are inoffensive or dull terms used in place of more blunt cognitive synonyms. Euphemisms have a perfectly acceptable social function. We use euphemisms to be polite or to avoid offending people. We talk about “passing away” or “using the rest room” instead of being blunt and saying that someone died or is excreting bodily waste.

In defending Richard Loeb, a kidnapper and murderer, Clarence Darrow said to the jury: “where is the man who has not been guilty of delinquencies in youth?”

Euphemisms become doublespeak when the inoffensive, less emotive, word or expression is used to mislead or deceive us about unpleasant realities, e.g., referring to a policy of mass murder and rape as “ethnic cleansing.”

When the United States attacked Libya on April 14, 1986, bombs were dropped on the city of Tripoli, killing civilians, including several children. Such deaths were referred to by White House press secretary Larry Speakes as “collateral damage.” Why? Because “collateral damage” does not hit home as hard as “killed innocent children and other noncombatants.” We might not be so willing to support our government’s actions if we put it bluntly that in retaliation for killing innocent Americans we killed innocent Libyans. A murder for a murder is the truth, but the truth is too ugly to face. We use language to soften the truth, to reshape it to a form we can stomach or even be proud of. Instead of saying that a person failed, one says that the person “did not respond to training.” Instead of “Death Insurance,” we’re sold “Life Insurance.” Cemeteries are called “Memorial Gardens.” The Air Force refers to a lost plane as being “temporarily geographically misplaced.” The Army refers to caskets as “transfer cases.” Spying is

“covert activity.” When an ally betrays us by revealing our plans to the enemy it is referred to as an “unintentional leak.” People who sneak into a country illegally are said to be “infiltrating.” When we surrender we don’t call it surrender; we call it “peace with honor.” A recent memo from my dean gave advice on what to do with students who were “psychologically challenged,” not emotionally disturbed. A member of Earth First! says on the radio that he had “decommissioned a bulldozer.” Good thing he didn’t sabotage it. And the President of the United States recently announced that the topic of discussion at a meeting had been “cultural issues.” Others at the meeting said the topic was “racism.” A singer recently told the world in her autobiography that her daughter was a “love-child.” In other words, the person the child called *daddy* was not her father.

Pornographic bookstores and theaters refer to themselves as “adult.” People who engage in sexual relations with each other say they are “sleeping together.” Even adultery is rare these days, having given way to “extramarital affairs.” Drug addicts are becoming rare, but there has been an increase in “chemical dependency.” If the media are sympathetic to your cause you are “homeless”; otherwise you are just another bum or transient.

Then there are all the euphemisms for *tax increases*. There’s *revenue enhancement*, *rate adjustment*, *benefit reduction*, *service charge*, *user fee*, *licensing fee*, *impost*, *tariff* and *toll*, just to name a few.

A Planned Parenthood booklet mentions a contraceptive that *kills* sperm, but an abortion is not said to kill a fetus or embryo. In fact, abortion is described without mentioning the fetus at all: it is simply called “terminating a pregnancy.”

When a local newspaper fired people and reduced the salaries of other employees the paper referred to “work force adjustments” and “job reclassifications.” A Houston judge and minister was rejected for the post of George Bush’s Ethic’s Czar because an FBI check revealed “a personal situation.”

Doublespeak euphemisms are used to make bad actions seem good or at least seem not too bad. Dull or weakly emotive language is often used so that we

“A good catchword can obscure analysis for fifty years.” --Wendell L. Wilkie

will not be stimulated to think about or act on what is said. For example, the Japanese Imperial Army instituted a policy, approved by the Japanese government, during World War II that involved kidnapping young women in conquered areas such as Korea or the Philippines and forcing their victims to have sex with Japanese soldiers in army run “brothels.” The kidnapped sex slaves were referred to as *comfort girls*. The Nazis called their comfort girls the *Joy Division*.

During the Vietnam War era, the term *friendly fire* meant shelling and killing your own troops or allies by mistake. The former president of Uganda, Idi Amin, called his murder squad the PUBLIC SAFETY UNIT (Kahane, 137).

The euphemisms used by government officials often are put forth in an attempt to dull the force of what the expressions mean and to make acceptable what otherwise might be repulsive. For example, nuclear war is referred to as “ultimate high intensity warfare”; illegal or immoral activities are referred to as “covert operations” or “inappropriate actions,” which is how President Nixon described the Watergate “burglary.”

Here are a few more of Lutz’s examples of euphemisms used to deceive or mislead: poor people are “fiscal underachievers” and a bank robbery is an “unauthorized withdrawal.” To kill is “to terminate with extreme prejudice.” Medical malpractice that either kills or maims becomes, in the eyes of physicians and their lawyers, “therapeutic misadventures” or “a diagnostic misadventure of a very high magnitude.”

“Negative patient care outcome” means the patient died. “Peacekeeping forces” aren’t trained to kill the enemy anymore; they are now “servicing the target” with the deployment of missiles called “Peace-

makers.” Where will it all end? In world annihilation with honor?

I once taught in a prison that was called a “conservation center.” Other prisons in California are called “correctional institutions” and the armed guards who run these places are called “correctional officers.” Do any of us really believe there is any *correcting* going on in these joints?

When a nuclear reactor malfunctioned at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania in 1979, officials at the facility spoke of “energetic disassembly” rather than of an explosion. A fire was called “rapid oxidation,” and the reactor accident was described as an “event” or a “normal aberration.” Plutonium contamination was called “infiltration” or described as “plutonium has taken up residence.” The governor of a state that has an identical nuclear plant to the one at Three Mile Island was told by Joseph Hendrie, the director of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, that the sister plant was “within an acceptable flat band of risk.” These examples from Mr. Hendrie are not only euphemisms, they are also examples of using *jargon* to mislead or deceive, the topic of the following section.

Exercises 2-2

A. Find or invent three examples of euphemistic language used to obscure the truth or deceive others. Advertisements and the discourse of politicians ought to provide you with plenty of examples. Here is an example from *The New Yorker*: Dr. Don Laub, surgeon specializing in transsexual surgery, does not do *sex-change operations*; he prefers to say that he does *sex confirmation surgeries*. (“The Body Lies,” by Amy Bloom, July 18, 1994, p. 43.) Here is another example from a letter to the editor of *The Sacramento Bee*: “...characterizing a Planned Parenthood facility as a *re-productive-health clinic*...is like describing a slaughterhouse as an *animal-euthanizing chamber*.

B. Rewrite a polemical diatribe or news story about some terrible disaster or event, replacing highly emotive terms with euphemisms. (This is good practice for those of you going into advertising, journalism, or politics.)

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2.2 Jargon

Jargon is the technical language of an art or science, trade or profession. When used properly, jargon facilitates communication among members of the same field. The special terminology of computer programmers, for example, is not confusing or deceptive when used amongst themselves. Jargon becomes doublespeak when pretentious, obscure or esoteric terminology is used to give an air of profundity, authority, or prestige to one’s claims. If the doublespeak jargon is typical of some class of people such as bureaucrats, politicians, academics, lawyers, etc., it is called “bureaucratese,” “politicalese,” “academese,” “legalese,” etc.

Doublespeak jargon has the effect of making the simple seem complex, the trivial seem profound, or the insignificant seem important. For example, the sometimes pretentious jargon of the social sciences is ridiculed by Edwin Newman. “Sociologists are people who pretend to advance the cause of knowledge by calling a family a ‘microcluster of structured role expectations’ or ‘a bounded plurality of role-playing individuals’” (Newman, 13). George Orwell ridiculed misleading jargon in his famous “translation” of a well-known verse from Ecclesiastes:

Objective considerations of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account.

The King James version of this passage reads

I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

People hired to sell things over the telephone are called “telemarketers” and grocery store cashiers are referred to as “career associate scanning professionals.” Baggers are “courtesy clerks.” The garbage collector is a “sanitation engineer” and the dump where the garbage is delivered is a “sanitary landfill.” A pothole is a “pavement deficiency” and a bum is a “non-goal oriented member of society.” A thermometer is called a “digital fever computer,” no doubt because you can charge more for it that way. Poor people are “economically non-affluent.” Cloths to clean compact discs do not pick up dirt but “micro-dust,” and dust becomes “airborne particulates.” That was not a bomb that inadvertently departed an airplane over a campground; it was a “vertically deployed anti-personnel device.” If you want your bomb to sound scientific you call it an “explosive device.”

A popular form of doublespeak jargon is to tack on the term *officer*, *specialist* or *technician* to a job title. A public relations person is “public information officer” or a “public services specialist.” A person who picks up the trash from the city beach or playground is an “environmental technician.” The one who cleans the toilets is an “environmental officer.”

Jargon can also be used to create technical sounding euphemisms that try to hide ugly realities or make bad or indifferent things seem good or fantastic. Such jargon can have the effect of deceiving us about things that are dangerous, harmful, or wasteful. Why does the CIA refer to a poison dart gun as a “nondiscernible microbionoculator?” To keep us from knowing what they are doing or why they spend so much money? To American military troops “airborne vector” refers to germ warfare by air and “employment of incapacitatory agents” means using nerve gas. Why does a psychiatry manual refer to obscene phone calls as “telephone scatologia?” To suggest that the one making the phone calls is sick and in need of treatment rather than evil and in need of punishment? A drug addict is said to have a “chemical dependency” and advised to go to the nearest “Opiate Detoxification Unit?”

When the United States invades a foreign country, our government euphemistically refers to the forces we support as “freedom fighters” not “traitors” or “rebels.” Even “invade” is avoided in favor of misleading jargon. When we invaded Grenada during the night, reporters were not allowed in and the government reported that there was “a pre-dawn vertical insertion.” That did not sound like we were sending paratroopers in under the cover of darkness. It sounded more like we were digging holes or performing surgery early in the morning.

When United States armed forces initiated their pre-dawn vertical insertion of Panama, the raid to kidnap Manuel Noriega was called **Operation Just Cause!** We still have not received reliable information on the collateral damage there. Our government is not about to publicize the substantial loss of civilian life and property damage. The truth might hurt and, what’s worse, the truth might make us ashamed rather than proud of President Bush and the American soldiers who took part in the invasion.

The government is not the only one concerned with using language to keep us from knowing the truth. Businesses are just as concerned that their stockholders do not know the whole truth about many of their dealings. In a footnote in National Airlines’ annual report for 1978, National explained that revenues of \$1.7 million came from “the involuntary conversion of a 727” (Lutz 1989, 4). Three of the fifty-two people aboard the involuntarily converted airplane were killed in the crash. What stockholder wants to be reminded that profits were made from an after-tax insurance benefit from the accident? If straight talk were used, somebody might figure out that the company’s profits weren’t due to management’s great planning but to accidents in which people were killed. If the company lost money, however, the annual report might have made mention of some “deficit enhancement” or “negative earnings.” A com-

pany with increased profits may have decreased revenues or earnings. Maybe this is why executives of companies that are losing billions of dollars a year can justify huge bonuses: they are based on profits not revenues. Profits can be increased by closing down plants, laying-off workers, collecting insurance and a host of other ways that have nothing to do with increased sales or earnings.

Public television stations use deceptive language when they refer to commercial messages from Mobil Oil or Exxon, etc., as “enhancement underwriting” rather than as commercials. The corporate benefactors of public television cannot legally buy commercial time, but they can make contributions in exchange for broadcasting messages that seem like commercials. In 1984 the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) received more than \$57 million dollars in corporate contributions. Since the money is not income but a gift to a non-profit organization, PBS saves money that would otherwise go to the U.S. government for taxes.³

Of course, we have all probably heard of contractors who do business with the Department of Defense referring to a hammer as a “manually powered fastener-driving impact device” and to a steel nut as a “hexiform rotatable surface compression unit.” Presumably, the contractors can charge exorbitant fees for such high-tech devices.

Finally, businesses and companies seem to think that they can take the sting out of laying off people by referring to “downsizing,” “right-sizing,” “repositioning,” “reshaping,” “decruting,” “de-selection,” “reducing duplication,” “focused reduction” or “census reduction.” The fact that so many terms have been used to replace “fired,” “reducing the head count,” or “getting the ax” may not indicate that corporations are developing bigger hearts, but that they are recognizing more and more the value of words to manipulate our perception of reality.

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Exercise 2-3

Find three examples of doublespeak jargon in newspaper or magazine articles. (E.g., calling a shovel an “emplacement evacuator” or a parachute an “aerodynamic personnel decelerator.”)

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2.3 Obscure and confusing language: gobbledygook

Gobbledygook is confusing non-technical language that misleads or deceives. Edwin Newman offers the following examples of gobbledygook:

The Undersecretary of the Treasury, Edwin H. Yeo III, is asked about additional loans to New York City: “If we find the reasonable probability of repayment is slipping away from us, then we’ll have to respond in terms of extension of future credit.” If they don’t pay what they owe, we won’t lend them any more (Newman, 5).

Late in 1974 the Secretary of Commerce, Frederick Dent, said that the rate of inflation in the second quarter of the year was 9.6 percent, and this “validated the essentiality of President Ford’s struggle to cut the inflation rate.” A civil tongue would have said justified, but that would have cost Dent three words and nine syllables and, in the way of Washington, which would never say satellite photography when it could say technical overhead reconnaissance, commensurate self-respect (Newman, 10).

Newman also tells the story of Nelson Rockefeller, who was asked whether he would be nominated for President at the 1976 convention. Rockefeller replied, “I cannot conceive of any scenario in which that could eventuate.” Neither could Newman.

“Half the game is 90 percent mental.”
---Danny Ozark

Often, obscure language is used in the attempt to make the necessarily vague appear to be scientific, to make the ordinary seem extraordinary, the simple seem complex, or the mundane seem profound. Sometimes obscure language is used to confuse the public or conceal the truth.

On the other hand, sometimes the intentions of those who purposely obscure matters are understandable, if not acceptable. For example, some obscurity results from the attempt to eliminate ambiguity and vagueness in legal contracts. Also, many people consider obscure anything which they do not immediately understand. It is true that what is clear to one person may be obscure to another. Obscurity is often a function of the lack of necessary background knowledge, especially the lack of necessary vocabulary.

Finally, for some people obscure language is simply a reflection of a confused mind and should not be considered doublespeak. For example, one of my students wrote that “The Bible is not a single book; it is the copulation of many books.” Such unintentional misuses of language should not be considered doublespeak any more than the linguistic gems provided by people attempting a language other than their own. For example, when Coca-Cola was introduced to China a multimillion-dollar campaign was introduced which proudly proclaimed its slogan: *Bite the wax tadpole*. No doubt, something was lost in the translation.

In order to avoid being obscure, good writers and speakers define expressions that their readers and listeners are likely to be unfamiliar with. Bad writers use definitions to make things even more confusing, as in this attempt to define “pattern of criminal profiteering”:

... engaging in at least two incidents of criminal profiteering that have the same or similar intents, results, accomplices, victims or methods of commission or otherwise are interrelated by distinguishing characteristics, including a nexus to the same enterprise, and are not isolated incidents, provided at least one of such incidents occurred after the effective date of this chapter and that the last of such incidents occurred within five years after a prior incident of criminal profiteering.⁴

This example of gobbledygook is about one notch less confusing than the following attempt to say “If your check bounces, our receipt is void”:

Any receipt for payment made is subject to the condition that it shall be void if any check or draft, to whomsoever payable, taken for or on account of the amount specified herein is dishonored for any reason and that no such check or draft shall constitute a payment to the Company, whether or not the amount due, or any part thereof, has been advanced or credited to the Company by any of its representatives, and that any check or draft so taken may be handled in accordance with the practice of any collecting bank.⁵

It may well be that some people fear that if they express themselves in simple language they might be taken to be simple themselves. Maybe that is why some educators use jargon and gobbledygook. They talk about training students to “successfully relate to others” or “interface with others” instead of saying that they want to teach their students to get along or cooperate. Maybe that is why some people have to “prioritize” instead of *decide* what’s most important, or they have to examine “delivery systems” instead of evaluating teaching methods. People cannot just do their best anymore; they have to “maximize their potential.” Meetings to discuss important matters and decide what to do about them have been replaced

with “quality conferences” or “intersegmental committees” “to essentialize priorities” and “take effective proactive stances.”

Finally, obscure language gives one an aura of complexity and profundity. Thus, jargon and gobble-dy-gook are often encouraged. We think obscure language will be taken as a sign of intelligence. Even so, it is still likely to lead to confusion and misunderstanding.

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Exercise 2-4

Find an example of gobble-dy-gook in one of your textbooks.

2.4 False Implications

The final type of doublespeak we will consider is the *false implication*: language that is clear and accurate but misleading because it suggests something false. For example, a package of Carnation Breakfast Bars asserts that the product inside provides 25% of the daily-recommended amount of protein if

Californians for Telecommunications Choice was the swell name taken by a consortium of competitors to Pacific Bell in a propaganda campaign led by AT & T.

taken with a glass of milk. What the package does not tell you is that all or almost all of the protein is provided by the milk, not by the breakfast bar. The clearly intended suggestion is that the bar is a good source of protein. Similarly, a package of *Healthy Choice* lunchmeat says that it is 97% fat-free, which is true if measured by weight, but when 25% of its calories come from fat, isn't the claim deceptive? Cow's milk and other dairy products are high in fat and cholesterol, but the dairy industry cleverly expresses fat content as a percentage of weight. Using this system, milk said to have 2% fat is actually 31% fat when fat is measured as a percentage of calories. Whole milk and yogurt are 49% fat, cheese is 60-70% fat. (There is no low fat butter: butter is 100% fat.)

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We Just Want to Help

The American Heart Association's "Heartguide" program awards a seal of approval to products that meet certain guidelines for total fat, saturated fat, cholesterol and sodium. Companies pay a fee of \$15,000 to \$640,000, depending on product sales, for the right to put a red heart with a checkmark on their products. The Heart Association won't reveal the criteria they use.

One product already approved is Promise margarine. Dr. Jeffrey Blumberg, professor of nutrition at Tufts University, claims "this can give a misleading impression that margarine is a heart-healthy food, and clearly it is not."

Dr. Dennis L. De Silvey, a cardiologist and a national board member of the Heart Association, replies: "It is totally incorrect that margarine is a bad food. People are going to eat margarine, and this makes it easier for them to understand what is the appropriate amount."

James S. Benson, acting commissioner of food and drugs for the Food and Drug Administration, said that the Heartguide program "could very easily result in the endorsement of products--such as some varieties of margarine, spreads and salad dressings--that quite simply do not represent the kinds of foods that ought to be promoted to achieve healthy hearts."

Bonnie Liebman, director of nutrition for the Center for Science in Public Interest, said: "The American Heart Association is filling the gap left by government. There are millions of people who want a simple thumbs up or thumbs down."

The grocery store is one of the places where deceptive use of language is commonplace, especially the use of false implications. Deceptive food labeling is so extensive that the Bush Administration announced plans for mandatory nutritional labeling on virtually all packaged foods.⁶ The Secretary of Health and Human Services, Dr. Louis W. Sullivan, claimed that the "grocery store has become a Tower of Babel, and consumers need to be linguists, scientists and mind readers to understand the many labels they see." Not wanting to sound too

alarmed, Sullivan added, “frankly, some unfounded health claims are being made.” Sullivan didn’t specify any particular claims that were unfounded but he did say that the government is concerned about claims such as “low fat,” “high fiber,” and “no cholesterol.” That is a good start. I hope they get around to defining some other terms as well, like “natural” and “pure” and “lite.” Chemicals that flavor, emulsify, or preserve a product may be present in foods labeled “natural” or “pure.” The next time you are in the grocery store pick up several “natural” or “pure” products and read the lists of ingredients. You may be in for an unpleasant surprise. Also, ask yourself why do so many products have the following words in their names or labels: “health” or “healthy,” “fresh” or “farm fresh,” “nutritional” or “country?”⁷ Do these word imply something that is false?

You might think that a product called Lemonade Flavor Drink might have some lemon in it. Not a chance. This General Foods product has no lemon juice, no lemon pulp, not even any lemon peel in it.

When asked how Pillsbury could call a product that contains artificial flavorings and BHA (a preservative) “Natural Chocolate Flavored Chocolate Chip Cookies,” a company representative replied that ‘natural’ modifies ‘chocolate flavored’ not ‘cookie.’ I guess that means that the artificial chocolate flavoring was natural. But what is the implication of those words to the shopper? Says Lutz, “You’d better brush up on the syntactic structure of modification if you want to be able to read food labels these days” (Lutz 1989, 28).

Finally, what does it mean for the environment now that so many products are being touted as *recyclable*, *recycled*, *biodegradable* or *ozone friendly*? What significance is there to Tetra Pak’s and Combibloc’s claim that their juice boxes are “easily recyclable” when there are few recycling programs that accept juice boxes? What was the point of Mobil Corp.’s claim that its Hefty trash bags are “degradable” when they degrade only if exposed to the ultraviolet light of the sun, but most such bags end up buried in landfills? Being made from recycled materials may not be significant if the *percentage* of recycled material in the product is negligible. Being compostable may be insignificant if there are not many facilities available to do the composting. Thus, what is the point of Proctor and Gamble, which has roughly half of the \$3.8 billion U.S. market for disposable diapers, advertising that it is developing technology that converts disposable diapers into compost? “The fact that they’re running these ads has led to a direct misleading effect,” said John McCaull, general council for Californians Against Waste. “It’s fostering a belief in the public that these facilities and programs actually exist when that’s hardly the case.”⁸

Exercise 2-5

Find three examples of false implications in product labeling or advertising.

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3. Other abuses of language

Besides doublespeak, there are several other abuses of language the critical thinker should consider: *hedging*, *weasel words*, *vague comparisons*, *assuring expressions* and *sneaking in opinions as if they were facts*....to name just a few.

3.1 Hedging

Hedging is using language that appears to commit one to a particular view, but because of its wording, allows one to retreat from that view. Hedging is a way to evade the risk of commitment. Former U.S. senator S. I. Hayakawa offers us one of the more effective examples of hedging in politics. When asked, “Should the United States give back the Panama Canal to Panama?” he responded, “Hell no. We stole it fair and square.” Hayakawa evaluated his response as being a “perfect political answer.” (And I always thought the perfect political answer was the one which said absolutely nothing, offended no one, and which everyone thought expressed their sentiments exactly!)

“I intend to open this country up to democracy and anyone who is against that I will jail, I will crush.”
--Joao Baptista Figueiredo, President of Brazil (1979)

While serving as Lt. Governor of California, Mike Curb was consulted on all major decisions by his record company, Mike Curb Productions Inc. During his campaign he had said: “If I’m elected, I will reorganize my assets, whether it’s a trust or whatever, so I am no longer involved.” When Curb was accused of going back on his campaign promise, he responded by saying that he draws a distinction between “being involved” and “being consulted.” “Being involved implies a day-to-day role,” he said, “which I am obviously not doing.”

President Ronald Reagan said in a televised speech: “I will not stand by and see those of you who are dependent on Social Security deprived of the benefits you’ve worked so hard to earn. You will continue to receive your checks in the full amount due you.” Had Reagan, who for years had publicly opposed increases in such federal programs, suddenly become a friend of those on Social Security? White House speaker David Gergen said that the President’s words were “carefully chosen.” Reagan was reserving the right to decide who was “dependent” on Social Security benefits, who had “earned” those benefits, and who was “due” what and how much the “full amount due” to them amounted to (Lutz 1989, 15-16). In other words, Reagan had not changed his position. Although he had nothing to do with the increases, which were mandated by Congress, Reagan tried to give the impression that he was somehow responsible for making sure that the benefits were paid.

President Bill Clinton took hedging to new heights in his many depositions and testimonies regarding his relationship with White House intern Monica Lewinsky. She stated in a sworn affidavit that “I have never had a sexual relationship with the president.” Clinton swore that what she said “is absolutely true.” She later admitted to having oral sex with the president; he later admitted that he “did have a relationship with Miss Lewinsky that was not appropriate.” Clinton tried to make a distinction between having a sexual relationship and engaging in sexual acts. Later, in his address to the people on August 17, 1998, he claimed that his previous “answers were legally accurate,” and he admitted only that he had “misled people.”

3.2 The language of advertising: weasel words, vague comparisons, and meaningless expressions

In order to hedge effectively, one must master a short list of *weasel words* that are often used to evade or retreat from direct, forthright statements. Weasel words give the impression of taking a firm position while actually avoiding commitment to any specific claim.

Advertisements tell us that certain products *help* or *may help* (prevent, stop or fight) this or that. A toothpaste *helps fight* tooth decay. An aspirin *may help* relieve pain. Note that the ads do not say specifically what the product will or can do. The only weaker claim they could make would be that their products *may or may not help* this or that.⁹

Many ads note that “supplies are limited.” That is true of just about anything in the sense that no consumer good could exist in infinite quantities. But the claim suggests that you better hurry and purchase the product before they’re all gone.

Then there is ‘only’, a little word used to suggest a great deal. What is the difference between pork bellies that are \$9.95 a lug and pork bellies that are *only* \$9.95 a lug? The latter sounds like you are getting a great deal. The word ‘only’ suggests that the price is low. Those special offers for “a limited time only” imply that you better order *now* before it is too late.

‘Only’ can also suggest that a statistic is low. “*Only* half of all women who have been married one time say they would marry the same man if they had it to do over again, according to a new survey.” If that were true then only half would *not* marry the same man again.

‘Almost’ is almost as slippery as *only*. Some products promise *almost* miraculous cures or *almost* superhuman healing secrets. Others promise to *almost* instantly get your dishes *virtually* spot-free. In other words, the product will not get your dishes spot-free instantly.

Another favorite expression of advertisers is ‘up to’, as in “This pen lasts *up to* 20 per cent longer.” The ad does not say that the pen *will* last twenty percent longer, but even if it did it still wouldn’t mean much since it doesn’t say longer than what. What does it mean when a package of almonds has the words “15% *more*” on it? Who knows? Or what is being promised by an ad which says “Come to our store and save *up to* 50 per cent.” Even if you save nothing you still save within the promised range. The ad only says that the most you can save is 50 percent; it says nothing about the least you can save. In fact, it does not even say that you will actually save anything—although that is clearly the inference the advertiser hopes the buyer will make.

It should be obvious that a critical thinker would not look to advertising as a source of reliable information, but as George Orwell pointed out, we need to keep asserting the obvious. Advertising may be interesting, seductive, productive, sexy, humorous, entertaining, misleading, deceptive, false, or malicious, but it is rarely informative. No one should base his or her beliefs about the world on advertising. It should go without saying that a critical thinker should not be seduced by the appeals of ads. True, many of our values and habits—even a few false needs—have originated in advertising (like our concern with bad breath or foot odor or the color of our lips or hair). True, many of us feel like inferior human beings because we are not thin or muscular, do not have good tans or thick hair, but we shouldn’t be swayed by the constant bombardment of ads that try to persuade us of what is good and what will make us happy.

“One can like or dislike a television commercial....But one cannot refute it.” -- Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*

Most advertisements do not provide us with good reasons to believe anything and they are certainly not reliable sources of information.

The language of advertising is usually either misleading, deceptive, vague, or absurd. We have already given examples of common weasel words used in ads, such as “helps,” “may help,” “only,” and “up to.” Besides these misleading and deceptive terms, ads frequently use *vague* language. Ads, for example, often make vague comparisons:

“Colgate users have *fewer* cavities. . . .” [fewer than whom?]

“15 % *more*” (on a package of almonds) [more than what?]

“In a recent survey, *more* people preferred” [how large was the survey? How many more?]

Ads often use *absurd or meaningless expressions*: a detergent is said to get clothes “whiter than white,” a beer is said to be the “King of Beers.” General Electric thinks we will be impressed that it brings “good things to life.” One ad tells us that “You can be sure if it’s Westinghouse.” Another declares: “Tandy. Clearly superior.” We are invited to “Come to where the flavor is. Marlboro Country” or to become part of “The Pepsi generation.”

In short, the language of advertising is like much of the language of politics: vague and deceptive. This should not be surprising, since most political speech is thinly disguised advertising. Press conferences and off-the-cuff remarks are often part of propaganda campaigns aimed at selling us on politicians and their ideas. It’s no secret that political candidates and elected officials hire advertising agencies to sell the public on images: the candidate becomes another commodity to be sold to the masses.

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Exercises 2-6

A. Find at least one example of a speaker, writer or advertisement that makes a *false implication* or which engages in *hedging*.

B. Find at least one example of a speaker, writer or advertisement that uses *weasel words*.

C. Discuss each of the following expressions used in advertisements. Are the ads deceptive in any way? How?

*1. Monsanto: “Without chemicals life itself would be impossible.”

2. Pacific Bell: “Reach out and touch someone.”

3. Marlboro Lights: “The spirit of Marlboro in a low tar cigarette.”

4. Colt 45 Malt Liquor: “If unique is what you seek.”

5. Beaulieu Vineyard (for a burgundy wine): “The anticipatory hush....The slow velvety pleasure.”

*6. Eve Light 120’s cigarettes: “Tastes as good as it looks.”

7. L & M cigarettes: “The proud smoke.”

8. Virginia Slims : “You’ve come a long way, baby.”

9. Edge skin conditioner: “Switch to new Skin Conditioning Edge gel, for that closer, smoother feeling.”

10. Scholl exercise sandals: “Sometimes dreams are only a step away.”

*11. Pantene Pro-V: for hair so healthy it shines.

12. There’s no dog like your dog. And no heartworm protection like ours. Heartworm protection plus. Right from the heart.

13. Just 5 calories per olive and tons of taste.

14. (Ad for the Chrysler New Yorker) “Like Most New Yorkers, this one is sophisticated, refined and definitely has an attitude.”

15. Loro Piana’s Tasmanian™ Fabric Performs Like No Other.”

D. Find three examples of advertisements which make absurd or meaningless claims. (E.g., “Gets clothes whiter than white”; “King of beers”; “G.E. We bring good things to life”; “You can be sure if it’s Westinghouse”; “Come to where the flavor is. Marlboro Country”; “Miller’s: Made the American Way.”)

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3.3 Assuring expressions and other no-brainers

One way to keep others from thinking about what you are saying is to assure them that what you have to say need not be questioned. This can be done very subtly by using *assuring expressions*. Many claims are preceded by expressions that assure us that they are warranted.

For example:

“As everyone knows....”

“As you already know....”

“The truth is....”

“Being reasonable, you will see....”

“Common sense tells us that....”

“It is certain that....”

“It has been shown that....”

“Experts agree that....”

“I assure you that....”

“That’s a no-brainer....”

Why are such assurances made? If everyone knows something, then there is no need to say that everyone knows it. The truth is that such assurances do not inform us of what they literally assert. Rather, they inform us that the speaker does not consider what follows to be up for question. So, we should not expect to be given any reasons for what follows. If the speaker did not use the assuring phrase or word, then perhaps someone might ask her to back up her claim. But who would dare question what he already knows? Who would contradict common sense or what everyone knows? The fact is that each of the above assurances implies trust. In a context of honest discourse among people who trust each other, assuring phrases save time and simplify communication. But even in situations of trust, people can—and sometimes will—abuse their position. So, we should be aware of and beware assuring expressions. Of course, everyone knows this already, since it is just a matter of common sense!

3.4 Sneaking in judgmental words: opinions put forth as facts

Another way to keep others from thinking is to use *judgmental words* that evaluate the situation so they can be spared the agony of thinking for themselves. There is nothing wrong with making judgments and using the appropriate words to express those judgments. However, some writers may give you their *evaluation* of the situation under the guise of a factual report. For example, a writer says that “an *accurate* assessment of the situation was made by the Pentagon” or “the President took *justifiable* pride in signing the Trade Agreement with China.” The writer is making judgments for you, telling you that an assessment is accurate or suggesting that a trade agreement was a good one. There are always those who are ready to give us the *right* view, the *correct* opinion, *trustworthy* advice, *reliable* information, or the *true* story about some *scoundrel*, *dishonest barracuda*, *interested party*, *pervert*, or *communist dupe*!

Beware of such language. It indicates people less interested in having you *think* than in having you *think as they do*.

Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the successful 1992 campaign in Colorado to pass a constitutional amendment barring laws that specifically protect homosexuals from discrimination. The leader of the campaign, Will Perkins, stated that “Language doesn’t shape the campaign—it *is* the campaign.” The hope was to influence and shape public opinion by characterizing homosexuals as people with a *sexual preference* rather than *sexual orientation*, who have an *agenda* rather than *goals* to secure *special rights* rather than their *civil rights*. On the other side, gay activists were trying to get the term “sexual preference” eliminated from public discourse because it implies that homosexuality is chosen rather than given to a person by nature or nurture.¹⁰ Each side recognized that the words used to frame

The following claims are taken from a list of written claims made by motorists who had been in accidents.

- I was taking my canary to the vet. It got loose in the car and flew out the window. The next thing I saw was his rear end and there was a crash.**
- The guy was all over the road. I had to swerve several times before I hit him.**
- I turned the wheel and found myself in a different direction going the opposite way.**
- A stop sign suddenly appeared where no stop sign had ever appeared before.**
- An invisible car came out of nowhere, struck my vehicle and vanished.**

the issues would affect how people would be encouraged to think about those issues without actually thinking about the issues.

4. Clarity and language: ambiguity and vagueness

Unclear language can be a hindrance to communication and to critical thinking. Language that is vague or ambiguous may be misunderstood. Ambiguous or vague language can be intentional and aim to deceive or mislead, as doublespeak does, but it can also be unintentional. Thus, here our focus will be on ambiguity and vagueness themselves, rather than on their intentional misuse. Our focus will therefore shift from being on guard against those who would intentionally mislead or deceive us, to the more positive goal of ensuring clear communication, whether it be our own or that of others.

4.1 Ambiguity

When a word or expression can be reasonably understood in more than one way, it is said to be *ambiguous*. For example, a group of parents opposing sex education classes at Catholic schools in the Sacramento diocese got together and called themselves *Irresponsible Sex Education Opponents*. Had they reflected a bit, they might have seen that their group’s name would be found highly amusing by the supporters of the classes. The opponents of the classes seem to be saying that they themselves are the ones who are irresponsible. Or maybe they’re saying that they are against education on irresponsible sex. Or maybe they’re saying they’re against sex education that is irresponsible, in which case they are suggesting that they believe there is a responsible form of sex education. In any case, it was a bad choice of words.

Ambiguity is often unintentional, due to carelessness. A writer or speaker intends to say one thing, but either says another or says it in such a way that it might be understood differently than intended. A headline states **LYING EXPERT TESTIFIES AT TRIAL**. Is the expert a liar? Is the one testifying an expert at telling when someone is lying? **PSA AIRLINES ONLY FLIES DIRECT TO BURBANK** a highway billboard declares. Is PSA the only airline that flies directly to Burbank? When PSA flies to Burbank does it only fly direct?¹¹ Or, is Burbank the only city to which PSA flies?

A headline says **CHILD MURDERER HAUNTS TOWN**. Is a child murdering people or is someone murdering children? **NUDE PATROL COMBS BEACH** states another headline. Are those on patrol nude or are they looking for nudists?

In 1978 the City Council of Florence, Oregon, found a unique way to solve the population problem. They passed an ordinance that made it illegal “to have sex while in or in view of a public or private place.” That about covers it. No doubt they were trying to ban scandalous sexual behavior, not all sexual acts.

<p>FOR SALE: Big dog. Beautiful animal, good watchdog. Will eat anything. Especially fond of children.</p>

In 1987 California Governor George Deukmajian appointed Dan Lungren as state treasurer following the death of Jesse Unruh. The state Senate approved the nomination but the state Assembly rejected it. The governor knew that the State Constitution asserts that for an appointment to be valid a majority is required in both houses. He cited a 1976 amendment to the State Constitution, however, as justifying his contention that Lungren should become state treasurer although rejected by the Assembly. The amendment states that “if neither confirmed nor denied by both the Senate and Assembly within 90 days, nominees may take office.” Lungren had been neither confirmed nor denied by both houses! The California Supreme Court ruled that the state Constitution’s requirement of a majority in both houses was the law. Clearly, somebody goofed in writing the amendment. It seems that the intent was to insure a speedy process, to make sure that a vote was not delayed indefinitely but was taken within 90 days of nomination. The governor was right; that’s not all the amendment says.

While ambiguity is sometimes intentional, as in the earlier examples of hedging by Ronald Reagan, Mike Curb, and Bill Clinton, ambiguity is often the result of carelessness. In either case, however, ambiguity is a hindrance to critical thinking. We cannot make reasonable judgments as to what to think and do if the information we receive is ambiguous. Often, even an astute critical thinker does not realize that an expression could be understood in another way, until it is too late.

4.2 Vagueness

Vagueness is often a considerable hindrance to critical thinking. Most communication, however, is vague to some degree. Vagueness only becomes a problem when language is less precise, specific, or definite than the context requires.

One kind of vagueness is due to not being precise or specific enough with numbers, directions, times, locations, etc. This kind of vagueness we might call **imprecision** and it can usually be cleared up by replacing the vague expression with a synonymous expression that is more precise. For example, “two hundred” is more precise than “many.” “March 15, 1986” is more precise than “sometime.” “San Francisco” is more precise than “somewhere north of Santa Barbara.” There are many expressions which could be replaced by precise numbers, times, dates, etc. How precise one should be depends on the situa-

tion. If the situation does not require more precision, there is no need to replace a vague expression. “I’ll pay you back soon” may be specific enough in most circumstances. But, if one needs the money tomorrow, “soon” may be too vague. “The movie lasts two hours, four minutes and seven seconds” is probably too precise for most circumstances, but anything less precise would be too vague for someone writing the musical score for the film. If your partner asks you how much you have in your joint checking account, your answer may not need to be as precise as what you would expect from your bank’s computerized records.

Another kind of problematic vagueness occurs frequently with qualitative terms and is due to lack of a definite boundary between two mutually exclusive **classes**. We may call this kind of vagueness **qualitative vagueness**. Two people may agree, for example, that only *justified killing* should be allowed, yet they may disagree as to the criteria for distinguishing *justified* from *unjustified* killings. That is, they may disagree as to the *definition* of the expression ‘justified killing’. Or, they may agree on the defining criteria of the term ‘justified killing,’ but disagree in specific cases on the application of the criteria. This may happen because the defining criteria themselves are vague. For example, each school board member may agree that unqualified or incompetent teachers should be fired and that an incompetent teacher is one who is frequently tardy or absent, who graduated from an unaccredited college, who is unsympathetic to the needs of children, and who fails to score satisfactorily on the annual teacher competency exam. Yet, there may be disagreement over the meanings of ‘frequently’, ‘unaccredited’, ‘unsympathetic’ and ‘satisfactorily.’

Many qualitative terms will be vague in many of their uses, yet this fact need not be taken as a warning that the use of such words will always be *too* vague. Most of us would have little difficulty identifying certain teachers as *incompetent*, certain behavior as *cruel*, or a certain person as *rehabilitated*. The blatant cases are obvious and clear enough. It is the borderline cases that cause the trouble, as we shall see in the next section.

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Exercise 2-7

Indicate whether the vagueness of the underlined words in the following passages is simply a matter of imprecision (which could be remedied by replacing the imprecise expression with a synonymous one that is more precise) or is a matter of qualitative vagueness (which could be made clearer only by giving defining criteria).

- *1. We cannot allow police brutality. Any police officer guilty of brutality will be suspended or fired.”
2. “I didn’t take much, just a little--only enough to get by. What’s a few dollars between friends?”
3. “We must get rid of the fat in government. The state and federal budgets should reflect appropriate cuts in the fat from the total budgets.”
- *4. “Inflation, I guarantee you my friends, will be curbed in the near future.”
5. “We are calling for an end to the exploitation of the American worker!”
6. “It is high time we elect a decent President!”
7. “The foster child program is failing because we do not have enough caring people to take in a foster child.”
8. “Our cuts in social welfare programs will not affect the truly needy.”
9. “Real Americans and true patriots will stand behind the President’s proposal.”
10. “You will be hired as a permanent employee after six months, if your work has been satisfactory.”

5. Definitions

Providing good definitions of key terms is essential to critical thinking. A good definition can prevent misunderstanding. A poor definition, on the other hand, can confuse or be used to sneak in questionable assumptions. Definitions may seem like a simple matter, but they can be quite tricky.

In our discussion of **qualitative vagueness** above, we mentioned borderline cases—those cases which were neither clearly in nor clearly out of a class. Some types of words are frequently used in ways that borderline cases cannot be resolved. **Evaluative terms** such as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are notoriously vague. **Relative terms** cannot be used to express absolute or fixed quantities or qualities, e.g., ‘tall’, ‘not much’, ‘shortly’. A relative term must have a fixed point of reference to relate it to, e.g., an elephant is big relative to a human being, but small relative to an ocean; a flea is small relative to a horse, but large relative to a proton. Clarification of qualitatively vague terms may be achieved by giving specific criteria for their application. To do so is to provide what is called a **precising definition**. However, the criteria—even if not vague themselves—may still be open to criticism. For one thing, a precising definition of a term must bear a strong resemblance to its ordinary meaning. After all, the purpose of a precising definition is to clarify the meaning of a term or expression. Thus, for example, to define a machine as “that which is technologically developed for the facile breeding of pigs” would be a bad precising definition because it bears no resemblance to the ordinary usage of the term. On the other hand, to define an automotive vehicle as “a self-propelled machine meant to be driven by human adults but not used for recreational purposes” might be an acceptable precising definition for an insurance contract. A freeway sign that declares that a *car pool* is “2 or more persons” bears some resemblance to our ordinary usage of the term. Even though most of us would require that the non-driving persons in the car fulfill some other requirements before we would say there is a *car pool*, the posted definition is adequate because it eliminates most vagueness.

Before accepting any criteria given to clarify the meaning of a vague term, one should first be clear as to why we need the clarification. Also, one should be clear as to the likely consequences of accepting the criteria. If you want automobile insurance, you will have to accept the precising definition of ‘motor vehicle’ used in the insurance contract. If that definition excludes recreational vehicles, farm implements and boats, then if you want insurance for any of those items you had better get the contract rewritten or find another insurance company. Or, if the school board must identify all the ‘unqualified’ teachers in its district because the State has said it will cut off funds to any school district that employs unqualified teachers, then the school board must find out what criteria the State uses to determine which teachers are unqualified. Here, the board would not only have to become aware of the likely consequences of accepting the criteria; they would have to become aware of the likely consequences of *not* accepting them. In such a case, the school board may have the power to object to the State’s criteria, but no power to refuse to accept them.

Defining a vague expression may clarify its meaning, but one is under no obligation to accept the definition just because it is intelligible. Many arguments are grounded in definitions from which conclusions may be inferred.¹² Being a definition does not shield a claim from criticism. For example, crime may be defined as “an offense by one individual against the established rights of another individual.” One may reject this definition if one believes (a) that crime is not only an offense against an individual but also an offense against society and/or (b) that the term *crime* should also refer to offenses against rights that haven’t yet been established by law. In other words, you may think that a given definition of crime is unacceptable because it does not include conditions that you believe are essential. Yet, if you accept the definition uncritically, you may have to agree that an argument based on the definition is a good one and that a conclusion that is supported by the argument is probably true, although in your heart you believe the conclusion is false.

The example above regarding the definition of ‘crime’ demonstrates that definitions can be packed with **theoretical implications**. If crime is defined as an offense by one individual against the rights of another individual, rather than as an offense against society, then the concept of justice may include the idea of restitution, of the criminal owing a debt to an individual—his or her victim, rather than to society. The idea of punishment—as well as many related ideas—will also be affected by how crime is defined. Hence, it is important when evaluating an argument to identify the definitions of key terms, one attempt to determine what implications those definitions have. Likewise, when you are constructing an argument, it is important that you define any key terms that might have important implications for your argument. Clear definitions of key terms not only decrease the chance of being misunderstood; they also assist the reader in following your reasoning. In addition, providing definitions of key terms forces you to be accurate and to think more clearly, both of which are essential to critical thinking.

5.1 Evaluating definitions

One cannot always resolve a disagreement over a precisifying definition by simply pointing out empirical facts; for, there may be no observations or experiences one can bring forth that would resolve the issue to everyone’s satisfaction. For example, one person believes that crime is only an offense against the rights of an individual. Another thinks this is false. Presumably, both are aware of the ordinary usage of the term ‘crime’ and believe that the issue cannot be resolved simply by referring to the dictionary or a legal authority. That is not to say that it would be irrelevant to bring up the ordinary or authoritative usage of the term as a reason for accepting one definition and rejecting another. Such a move would be appropriate. But, it may not resolve the issue, for there may also exist a fundamental disagreement about many related issues, and no resolution of the disagreement may be possible without one side abandoning many related beliefs and attitudes. If such a situation occurs, perhaps the best that can be hoped for is mutual toleration and enough respect to make an honest effort to understand each other’s arguments.

While definitions cannot resolve every disagreement about the usage of terms, definitions are indispensable to clear communication. And, while some kinds of definitions—such as precisifying definitions—are given to state how one intends to use a term, other definitions are given to state an accepted usage of a term, i.e., they are dictionary definitions. The dictionary or *lexical* definition of a word is a guide to its correct application. If the word may be used to refer to things or acts, etc., then the word is said to have a **denotation**. **A word denotes whatever it refers to.** The denotation of the word *crime*, for example, would be all the acts that may be correctly referred to by that word. If ‘crime’ is defined in such a way that it denotes acts which one believes are not crimes, then one would criticize the definition for being **too broad**, for including too much, for referring to things beyond the boundary, so to speak, of the class of acts that one believes may properly be called crimes. On the other hand, if the definition of ‘crime’ does not denote some acts that one believes are crimes, then one would criticize the definition for being **too narrow**, for not including acts it should include, for not referring to acts it should refer to. If a definition implies that a word denotes what it should not denote but fails to denote what it should denote, then the definition is said to be *both too broad and too narrow*. It may seem contradictory to say that a definition is both too broad and too narrow, but being too broad only means that the definition denotes items beyond its proper boundary, while being too narrow means that the definition does not denote items within its proper boundary. A definition that is both too broad and too narrow is like a misplaced boundary fence that both encloses land it should not and encloses only part of the land it should.

Since there is no agreed upon way to settle many of the disagreements over the definitions of terms, it is often the case that the best one can do is to compare the definitions to common usage. If a definition bears little or no resemblance to how a word is ordinarily used, then an explanation of the uncommon usage should be forthcoming. In any case, it is up to the listener or reader to decide whether to accept or reject the definition. In many cases, the best one can do is to try to understand how the definition fits in with other beliefs a person holds. For example, opponents on the abortion issue may begin with different definitions of the key term 'person'. The opponent of abortion may define 'person' so that it denotes fetuses. The proponent of abortion-on-demand may define 'person' in such a way that some or all fetuses are not denoted by the term. The issue is not an empirical one and cannot be resolved by appeals to observations or facts. Each may be using 'person' in a way that is consistent with common usage. Neither is able to accept the other's definition because to do so would not serve the theoretical purpose for which the definition was given. To accept the other side's definition would be to accept the other side's argument.

It should be noted that not all definitions that restrict the correct application of a word or expression occur in arguments over controversial issues. In contracts and in the social sciences the meanings of key terms are often stipulated. For example, most automobile insurance contracts give a precisifying definition of the expression 'motor vehicle' so that it is stipulated that the term does not denote recreational vehicles, farm implements, electric golf carts, driven lawn mowers or boats. The purpose for such stipulations about the denotation of the term 'motor vehicle' is clear: the insurance company does not want to pay out for items it did not intend to cover and the insured person should know exactly what is covered under the conditions of the policy.

Social scientists often define terms by giving **operational definitions**, by **describing the operations that are used to determine the correct application of an expression**. For example, quick reflexes might be defined as "a reaction time to a tone under one-fifth of a second measured by a latency clock." Note how such a definition would eliminate most of the vagueness that would accompany most uses of the expression *quick reflexes*. Such a definition, however, is packed with theoretical implications about behavior. In particular, this definition implies that some behavior is quantitatively measurable. Such a definition may issue from a behaviorist, a psychologist who believes—among other things—that human behavior can be understood in the same way that the behavior of physical bodies can be understood in physics, viz., by observation and measurement of the movements of bodies.

Exercise 2-8

Discuss each of the following definitions in terms of clarity (too vague, ambiguous or obscure) and extension of denotation (too broad, too narrow).

*1. A biology text book defines *cetacean* as "of or pertaining to an order (Cetacea) of aquatic, mostly marine, mammals, consisting of the whales, dolphins, porpoises, narwhals, grampuses, etc., having a large head, fishlike hairless bodies, and paddlelike forelimbs."

*2. A student in a political science class is asked to define *demagogue* and answers that "a demagogue is someone with charisma."

*3. A character in a novel defines *freedom of speech* as meaning "the freedom to say whatever the government will allow you to say."

*4. A pamphlet from a local church defines an alcoholic as "someone who drinks two or more beers a day."

*5. A student delivers a speech in which she asserts that she means by the word *person* "a human being capable of social and political involvement with other human beings."

*6. A philosophy text gives as a definition of *spirit* the following: "non-material substance."

7. In an essay, an economist defines *recession* as follows: “a depression without the foreboding connotation of economic stagnation.”
8. A humanities text defines *campanile* as “a freestanding bell tower.”
- *9. A book by an anthropologist defines *aggression* as “unprovoked physical attack aimed at elevating the aggressor to a position of higher status than his victim.”
10. A lawyer is asked to define just law and she replies by saying that “a just law is one which has been passed by a duly elected legislature.”
11. “Art is a selective re-creation of reality according to an artist’s metaphysical value-judgments.” --Ayn Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto* (New York: Signet Books, 1971, p. 64.
12. “Power may be defined as the production of intended effects.” --Bertrand Russell, *Power* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1969), p. 35.
13. “A vested interest...in ordinary intercourse is an improper advantage enjoyed by a political minority to which the speaker does not himself belong.” --John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (New York: Mentor Books, 1958) p. 146.
14. Inflation is “persistently rising prices.” --John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (New York: Mentor Books, 1958) p. 169.
15. “Thus we may define the real as that whose characters are independent of what anybody may think them to be.” --Charles S. Peirce, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear.”
16. *Joy* is man’s passage from a less to a greater perfection....*Sorrow* is man’s passage from a greater to a less perfection.” --Baruch de Spinoza
17. “An instinct is defined as an inborn condition which imparts direction to psychological processes.” --Calvin S. Hall, *A Primer of Freudian Psychology* (New York: Mentor Books, 1954), p. 37.
- *18. “At any rate, hereafter the word >superstition= will be used in the sense of the kind of belief and action a reasonable man in present-day Western society would regard as being >superstitious’.” --Gustav Jahoda, *The Psychology of Superstition* (Great Britain: Pelican Books, 1970), p. 10.
19. “Artificial intelligence: Behavior by a machine that, if exhibited by a human, would be called intelligent.”
20. “Immorality then, for the purpose of the law, is what every right-minded person is presumed to consider to be immoral.” --Patrick Devlin, *The Enforcement of Morals*.

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6. Claims

Language can be used for many purposes. We use language to ask questions, to request permission, to excuse ourselves, to get married, to give orders, to express our feelings, etc. One of the most important uses of language is to make claims. **To make a claim is to assert that something is true or reasonable to believe or do.** We are using language to make claims when we state our beliefs or affirm that some action should be taken. “I am reading my logic text,” “I should be studying physics tonight,” “That portrait is beautiful” or “It is wrong to lie, even when you gain an advantage by doing so” are examples of claims.

There are many types of claims. **Claims can be descriptive or evaluative.** We can claim that something is true, or that it is false. We can claim that something should or should not be done. A critical thinker must know how to properly evaluate different types of claims. What makes a claim reasonable or credible? What makes a claim unreasonable or incredible? Often, in evaluating a claim, we must consider the **source of the claim** as well as the **kind of claim** made. Both sources and claims vary in their credibility. In the next chapter, we will consider the question of the reliability of sources. Here we will focus on claims themselves, independent of their sources.

Some claims are so ridiculous we can be reasonably sure they are false without considering their source. Headlines in pulp papers sold at grocery store checkouts fit this rule.

INGO SWANN’S ASTRAL BODY SIGHTS TWO-HEADED ELVIS ON MARS!

WOMAN GIVES BIRTH TO OWN MOTHER WHILE HUSBAND WHISTLES!

QUEEN OF ENGLAND RAISED FROM HER GRAVE BY SORCERER!

Such claims are incredible on their face. We laugh at them, and rightly so. Being open-minded does not mean we should take such claims seriously and investigate them to find out if they are true. Claims that violate ordinary expectations, that are inconsistent with the experience of most people, that are contradicted by numerous reliable witnesses, or claims that are said to be understandable only by those with some special power, are incredible and ought to be rejected by a reasonable person. Even if there is a remote possibility that they might be true—and even if the source of the claim is a person of the highest integrity—a reasonable person should still reject such claims because they are most probably false. A person of unquestioned integrity who claims to have seen a centaur or a satyr is more likely to have gotten it wrong than right. As a rule of thumb, ask yourself *which is more likely, that the claim is true or that the one making it is wrong?* Which is more likely: that a human being was raised from the dead or that a human being is lying or mistaken about such an event? Which is more likely: that a human being has an “astral body” that flew to Mars during the night and saw a two-headed Elvis or that a human being is lying about it or had a dream or other hallucination that he mistook for reality?

On the other hand, there are some claims that nobody in their right mind would question. That you were born, for example, even your worst enemy could not seriously doubt. There are some claims that no conscious American adult living in 1999 would doubt, such as the claim that Bill Clinton was President of the United States in 1999. There are also many claims that none of us have any doubts about because of our experiences: for example, that milk poured into amber tea changes the color of the tea to a light brown, or that you bleed when cut.

There is an area of philosophy—called **epistemology**—where both incredible and indubitable types of claims are examined, along with many other types of claims, to determine which kinds, if any, can be known to be true. Our concern here, though, is not with the **truth** of a claim in any absolute sense. Our concern is with **reasonable belief**. Even if we cannot know with infallible certainty that we will bleed the next time we are cut, it is still reasonable to believe we will. The criteria for absolute truth and certainty are much more stringent than the criteria for reasonable belief.

What we want to hammer out are some rules for judging those claims that are neither incredible nor unquestionable. Moreover, we want some guidelines for evaluating claims in areas where we lack knowledge and/or experience. The first step is to recognize that there are several types of claims, each of which needs its own set of rules. We won't consider all of the different types of claims there are, just those that are essential to our purpose and about which there is likely to be some confusion that needs to be cleared up.

6.1 Claims used to state facts or to state opinions

As we said in the first chapter, **facts** are **what we take to be certain or true and which we consider unreasonable to doubt**. **Opinions**, on the other hand, are often contrasted with facts as being uncertain and reasonable to doubt. For example, if someone claims (1) she perceived a dark object of

human proportions moving across a field at night and (2) she believed that the object was her neighbor, her first claim might be taken as a fact but the second claim would be taken as an opinion. The difference seems to be due simply to the amount of interpretation the perceiver does. If the perception requires simple and ordinary sense perception (e.g. of shapes and colors) and a minimal amount of interpretation, the event perceived is considered a fact. If the perception requires making judgments that go beyond simple sense perception (that a shape is the shape of one's neighbor) the event related is considered an opinion. The opinion may turn out to be true, however. So, **it is not accurate to say that facts are certain and true, while opinions are not. Some opinions are based on mounds of evidence and have a high degree of probability.**

Another reason for not distinguishing facts and opinions as certain versus uncertain is that 'fact' is also used to mean 'event', 'actuality', or 'reality'. Many things that are claimed to be actualities or realities turn out not to be so after all. What was claimed to be a fact turns out to be false.

Rather than think of **opinions** as uncertain claims, it would be better to think of them as **beliefs that reflect judgments. Judgments reflect interpretations or evaluations.** It may be a fact that the local river is filled with dead fish, but it is a judgment (opinion) that the fish died because of lack of food. That judgment, however, might come to be taken as a fact (i.e., as certain) if the evidence supports it beyond a reasonable doubt. There is, in other words, no clear line that separates facts from opinions in terms of certainty. Perhaps it would be less confusing if the distinction were made between **statements of fact** and **statements of opinion**, rather than between facts and opinions.

Determining whether something is a fact requires knowing whether or not it is true. Determining whether something is a statement of fact requires knowing only whether or not it is stated as if it were true. Determining whether it is a fact that the fish died because of lack of food requires more specific and detailed knowledge than would be required to determine whether the statement "The fish died because of lack of food" is stated as a fact or as an opinion. It is obvious that it is stated as a fact. If it were stated as an opinion, the speaker would indicate this by using expressions such as 'it is my opinion that', or 'might have' or 'probably', e.g., "It is *my opinion* that the fish died because of lack of food," "The fish *might have* died because of lack of food" or "The fish *probably* died because of lack of food."

In sum, facts and opinions both run the gamut from uncertain to very certain. A statement of fact, however, is asserted to be certain. A statement of opinion is asserted to be uncertain and debatable.

6.2 The strength of claims

Claims can vary in strength from **very weak** claims--claims asserting that something is merely **possibly** true—to **strong claims**—claims that something is **probably** true—to **very strong** claims—claims that something is **actually** or **necessarily** true. Weak claims require only general knowledge and experience to determine whether they are acceptable. Strong claims require interpretation or judgment based on special knowledge or experience, and generally should not be accepted without compelling evidence.

If an opinion is stated very weakly, it may be reasonable to accept it without requiring proof. For example, a claim that "the cause of the fishes' deaths *might be* toxic pollution" is much weaker than the claim that "toxic pollution *probably* caused their deaths" or "arsenic poisoning *definitely* caused their deaths." Claims that assert mere possibility generally need little support to justify them. Your own general knowledge, or knowledge

<p>"Experience is the name everyone gives to their mistakes." --Oscar Wilde</p>

about the source of the claim, will usually be sufficient to recognize their credibility. Our own knowledge that toxic pollution is a major problem and that the source of the claim is an expert from the department of fish and game, would be sufficient to warrant accepting the claim that “the cause of death *may be* toxic pollution.”

In general, however, opinions beyond our knowledge or experience as to what *is* or *is probably* or *necessarily* the case will require support to make it reasonable for us to accept them. Claims that involve interpretation or evaluation of data, even if made by experts speaking in their field of expertise, usually should not be accepted solely on the basis of the say-so of the expert. This is especially true if the expert’s field is controversial. A field is controversial if the experts themselves disagree about fundamental matters or about the interpretation of generally accepted facts in the field. These are topics we will turn to in the next chapter on sources.

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Exercise 2-9

For each of the following claims, identify (1) whether it is stated as a fact or as stated as an opinion and (2) identify the strength of the claim: *weak* = a possibility claim; *strong* = most probability claims; *very strong* = an actuality or necessity claim, and some probability claims, e.g., “**it is highly probable.**”

- *1. Most welfare recipients are able-bodied persons who are too lazy to work and who would rather cheat the government than take an honest job.
- *2. Homosexuals are more immoral than heterosexuals.
 3. The major cause of violent crime is leniency in our courts.
- *4. Anyone who supports legislation which would allow abortions condones the murder of innocent children.
- *5. Prison guards are well-trained professionals capable of handling any disturbance prisoners might make.
- *6. God probably exists.
- *7. Ripe Macintosh apples are red.
 8. The best counselors for juvenile delinquents are ex-convicts who were juvenile delinquents themselves.
- *9. Cigarette smoking is hazardous to one’s health.
10. Pornography is harmful to society.
- *11. Nuclear reactors are unlikely to be unsafe.
12. Only physical things are real; there are no spirits.
13. It is immoral to use drugs for pleasure.
14. Drug dealers should be given capital punishment.
- *15. Aliens from other planets may have visited earth in ancient times.
- *16. My economic policies will reduce inflation by as much as 10 percent and increase employment by as much as 5 percent.
- *17. The deaths of thousands of fish each year above Sacramento may be caused by a combination of problems, including a chemical in agricultural canals.
18. If gold is dipped in hydrochloric acid, the gold will not dissolve.
19. The essence of mind is thinking.
20. There might have been three stabbings of inmates by other inmates at the state prison last week.
- *21. All persons have a natural right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.
22. This person no longer has violent tendencies and is unlikely ever to rape and murder again.
23. The essence of physical reality is extension in space.
24. Cave paintings of animals done more than 25,000 years ago were probably done in order to assist the initiation of young men into the adult world of hunting.
- *25. Interest rates may drop by as much as ten percent within the next six months.
26. It is necessarily the case that the soul has a beginning but is immortal.
27. People who love one another are happier and more productive than those who do not love one another.
28. Human beings are not naturally aggressive.
29. Anyone can have an out-of-body experience if they follow my easy ten-step plan.

*30. Only empirical statements are meaningful.

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Exercise 2-10: Self-test: true or false?

1. A euphemism is an offensive word used in place of an inoffensive one.
2. Emotive language is always inappropriate for a critical thinker.
3. When a word or expression can be reasonably understood in more than one way, it is said to be ambiguous.
4. An expression which precedes a claim and which indicates that the claim is not up for questioning is called a(n) assuring expression.
5. A definition is too broad if its denotation does not include items it should include.
6. Definitions are rarely packed with theoretical implications.
7. Clarification of a term by giving specific criteria for the correct application of the term is to provide what is called a precis-ing definition.
8. In contracts and in the social sciences the meanings of key terms are often stipulated.
9. Highly emotive language may be more effective than logical reasons in persuading others.
10. Social scientists often define terms by giving operational definitions, by describing the operations which are used to de- termine the correct application of an expression.
11. Language can be clear and accurate but misleading.
12. We cannot make reasonable judgments as to what to think and do if the information we receive is ambiguous.
13. A precis-ing definition is one which gives specific criteria for the correct application of a word or expression.
14. A word's denotation is what the word refers to.
15. An operational definition is one given in terms which describe the operations or measurements used to determine the cor- rect application of an expression.
16. The language of advertising is usually either misleading, deceptive, vague or absurd.
17. How precise one should be depends on the situation.
18. Vagueness which is due to lack of a definite boundary between two mutually exclusive classes is called qualitative vague- ness.
19. The primary meaning of euphemism is the "technical language of a science, trade, art or profession."
20. Gobbledygook is confusing or convoluted use of words which obscures thought.
21. The descriptive content of a word or expression is called its emotive content.
22. Emotive language used to bypass reasoning, to persuade without offering any logical reasons, or to stimulate people to action by preying upon their fears, prejudices, or hopes is called loaded language.
23. A definition is too broad if it excludes in its denotation items which should be included.
24. "Doublespeak" refers to language which is used to attempt to deceive or mislead.
25. Judgmental words are often used to sneak in evaluations, thereby sparing you the agony of thinking for yourself.
26. A probability claim is considered to be a strong claim, i.e., one requiring support before one should assent to it.
27. Possibility claims are considered to be weak claims, i.e., claims requiring only general experience to know whether they are true or not.
28. To call something a *fact* is to say that we take it to be certain and would consider it unreasonable to doubt it.
29. All opinions are uncertain and all facts are certain.
30. Some opinions are probably true.
31. Advertisements are generally unreliable sources of accurate and complete information.
32. A necessity claim is considered a weak claim.
33. An actuality claim is one which is actually true.
34. Opinions are beliefs which reflect judgments.
35. *Hedging* is to use language which appears to be clear and precise but which is vague or ambiguous enough to allow the user to back off from the apparent meaning.
36. True and clear claims can make *false implications*.
37. A critical thinker must be aware of people who state their opinions as if they were facts.
38. Expressions such as *save up to 50%* and *may help fight tooth decay* are called *weasel words*.
39. The statement "The teacher was on time for class today" could be misleading.
40. The cognitive meaning of a word is the attitude expressed by the word.

41. Jargon is the technical language of a trade or profession.
 42. The following claim is a *weak* claim: “It is necessarily the case that God exists.”
 43. The following claim is a very strong claim: “The president’s health plan may not pass the Senate.”
 44. The following claim is a strong claim: “The Brazilians will probably not win the World Cup.”
 45. The following is a very strong claim: “The Americans will not win the World Cup.”
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Notes - Chapter Two

¹George Orwell’s novel, *1984*, depicts a totalitarian state where language was one of the most important weapons used to control thought and action. “Newspeak” was Orwell’s term for the official state language. And “doublethink” was his term for holding two opposing ideas at the same time, e.g., “War is Peace.”

²Lutz distinguishes the use of *jargon* and *gobbledygook*, to be discussed below in separate sections. He also discusses the use of inflated language to make the ordinary seem special (e.g., calling a used car a “pre-owned vehicle”). We will discuss inflated language together with jargon and gobbledygook, rather than in a separate section.

³“PBS ‘commercials’ draw more criticism than new revenue,” Sally Bedell Smith, *The Sacramento Bee*, April 6, 1985, p. A15.

⁴These words are taken from a California State senator (Campbell) who proposed them as part of a Senate Bill (#1215).

⁵“Words CAN Really Hurt Me,” by Sylvia Rubin, *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 20, 1979, p. 29.

⁶*New York Times*, March 7, 1990, p. 1.

⁷On November 6, 1991, the Food and Drug Administration and the Agriculture Department unveiled the most sweeping set of food-labeling rules in U.S. history. Some of the rules are: to be labeled “lite” or “light” a product must have one-third fewer calories than comparable products; if a product high in fat claims it is low in sodium the label must say “see back panel for information about fat and other nutrients”; a nutrient chart on an FDA-regulated product will become mandatory and the chart is to give data on total calories, calories derived from fat, total fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, total carbohydrates, sugars, dietary fiber, protein, sodium, vitamins A and C, calcium and iron. Another rule prohibits claims which link a product’s high fiber with reduced risk of heart disease or cancer. “Low-fat” will be defined to mean that the product contains less than 3 grams of fat per serving; “serving” will be defined and be uniform for similar products. The rules, if all goes well, should be in effect by the end of 1992. By that time the food industry and Vice President Dan Quayle’s Competitiveness Council may have lobbied the FDA and USDA to the point where these most sweeping rules are swept away. But maybe not; after all, who would have thought that the Berlin Wall would come down, the Soviet Union be dissolved and Jews and Arabs would sit at the same table to discuss peace, all within our lifetime!

⁸“State insists ‘green’ labels be true-blue,” Philip J. Garcia, *The Sacramento Bee*, Sept. 1, 1991.

⁹“Weasel words are words that suck all of the life out of the words next to them just as a weasel sucks an egg and leaves the shell.” From the June 1900 issue of *Century Magazine*. Weasel words were first associated with politicians, who seem to have a penchant for saying things like “The public must be *duly* protected,” instead of “The public must be protected.” See *The Facts on File Encyclopedia of Word and Phrase Origins* by Robert Hendrickson (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1987).

¹⁰“Gay, Lesbian Groups Seek to Expunge Bias They See in Language,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 23, 1993, p. A8.

¹¹In airline doublespeak, a direct flight is not necessarily a nonstop flight. A direct flight is one which does not require a transfer of airplanes. So, all nonstop flights are direct but not all direct flights are nonstop. (Lutz, p. 22).

¹²We are using *argument* in a technical sense here. An *argument* is the presentation of reasons in support of some position. A *conclusion* is the position the argument tries to support. The nature of argument is the topic of chapter four.

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