

Power and the Defining of Political Terms

In the fabric of political discussion, there is a notable void of common definitions which often hinders dialogue and robs political debate of the empiricism found in hard sciences. This problem has been the focus of a wide array of authors over the time, ranging from Thomas Hobbes to George Orwell. Using the framework of their discussions, we can study the hypothetical and historical effects prevalent in modern political discourse by the accidental and intentional obfuscation of semantics. More precisely, we can use these perspectives to find the ways in which political actors throughout time have used the definition of language to further their pursuit of political power.

Thomas Hobbes dedicated much of Leviathan to the establishment of universal definitions of the most basic terms of power and politics of the 16th century discourse. These declarations parallel the basic mechanisms of proofs essential to hard sciences like mathematics and physics. Among these “proofs” is the postulation that the function of communications within societies is “*to show to others that knowledge which we have attained; which is to counsel and teach one another.*”¹ Of equal interest to political science is inference of the role of communication in one’s internal dialog and the archiving of knowledge. This memory retention function is described by Hobbes’s allegory of the struggle of a man

¹ Leviathan, Chapter 4

incapable of communication to easily establish the nature of triangle, this struggle is the result of his loss of the ability to register thoughts to avoid unnecessary labor and affect future thoughts. In the man's case, he cannot classify the general form of a triangle, so he cannot apply simple geometric rules without repetitively being forced to derive them.

Through this important mechanism of interpersonal behavior of speech that Hobbes's implies that dissent is not liable to spread in conditions where anti-establishment terms are unknown to the governed, a concept important for the later works of George Orwell. From this it becomes evident that for any regime to retain power it must concern itself with the method and content of discussions of the government, even going as far as influencing the meaning and use of words. In effect, this modified dialect has the purpose of serving as a firewall against ideas offensive to the ideals of society and will of the sovereign. The secondary role of the manipulation of speech is the ability of leaders to affect thought by affecting internal classifications.

As in Hobbes's case of the blind man and geometry, if the term 'triangle' is redefined to exclude the isosceles triangle, the difficulty endured by the continuous reprocessing of each of these shapes is likely to create a mild aversion to the form and its distinction from normal geometry to the point where the form bears a distinct name and distinct formulas. Hobbes continues this parallel of mathematics with the idea that untrue definitions have the tendency to snowball and create a chaos of invalid work. The state must be concerned '*when men register their thoughts wrong by the inconstancy of the signification of their words*'². Therefore, geometric precision of conversation is a necessity in the establishment of a unitary state.

² Leviathan, Chapter 4

Science has throughout the past century constantly defined the key concept of evolution as the progress of organisms by random mutation with regulation by natural selection, whereas in political science there is no agreement on the meaning of even the most central terms in political science like 'fascism'. The essay by George Orwell titled Politics and the English Language is a logical extension of Leviathan's chapter 'Of Speech'. Orwell argues that no matter the cause, the degradation of the English language has led to an emptiness in political writings in recent times. According to his critique, writers current to his time have become dependent on meaningless terms and metaphors to avoid critical thought that may be disputed. Orwell and Hobbes both explicitly call out the emptiness of significant terms in political dialogue.

The role the narrator of 1984, Winston Smith, extends Orwell's argument on this abuse further. The transitional struggle of the state in 1984 was not against armed opposition nor the trivial fluctuating war against its external enemies Eurasia and Eastasia, but its efforts to redefine the vernacular of society. This fight is the antidote the 'cancer' of rebellion, thoughtcrime and the likes of the token of opposition, Emmanuel Goldstein. This was taken to such an extreme that the old guard of the 'Ingsoc' ideology establishes a standard dictionary to which government communications are mechanically updated by Winston Smith's bureau of the government. Interestingly, there appears to be little thought in the technocrats of the department that they are doing little more than fixing inaccuracies and inconstancies in the historical record, not inventing one. To this same effect, in any society, the refinement and usage of terms is likely not the intention of the populace or most leaders. These are the conditions of the system they were indoctrinated into, just as in current society the subjective accusation of 'terrorism' immediately delegitimizes any cause in opposition to the state.

While Hobbes's argument is heavily focused on the idea that the definitions of terms restricts the flow of sedition, Orwell and 1984 argues that the central power of delegitimizing terms is in the restriction of the capacity of thought and the development of seditious thoughts.

“Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make Thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it.”³

For clarification and the direct discussion of the power of Newspeak, a supplement titled ‘The Principles of Newspeak’ was written by Orwell regarding the function of the Ministry of Truth's dictionary. The theory of the leaders of English Socialism was that the refinement and creation of words which lack alternative meanings will lead to a world devoid of political complexity and irrelevant philosophical concepts, necessary grounds for the mechanisms of Ingsoc socialism. These changes go as far altering grammar to make anti-government statements syntactically possible, but devoid of logic.

The real world significance of this discussion is not hard to find. No matter if we are looking at the political discussions of the United States or North Korea, the meaning of key terms is often used to discredit opposition or reenforce the power of the elite. Especially with Hobbes's and Orwell's issue on the void of agreement on the meaning of key terms do we see real world implications. Most commonly in Asian and African authoritarian regimes, leaders go as far as naming their state in favorable empty terms, North Korea calls itself the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and mainland China goes by People's Republic of China. It is safe to

³ 1984, Page 52

say with no off-topic analysis of the Chinese and North Korean systems of government, that this flies in the face of the western notations of the terms ‘democratic’ and ‘republic’.

This theory on the power of language took a tragicomic manifestation in the lead up to the Bosnian civil war in the 1990s. As ethnic division increased, leaders of ethnic factions stressed and increased social division among the populace by reverting to semantics different ages and different cultures.

“Since there was, in essence, one language, the Serbs, Muslims and Croats each began to distort their own tongue to accommodate the myth of separateness. The Bosnian Muslims introduced Arabic words and Koranic expressions into the language...just as energetically the Croats swung the other way, dusting off words from the fifteenth century”⁴

This rush to linguistic purity often led to a bizarre chaos of words devised by amateurs and politicians.

Despite the visible inability of leaders to fully comprehend even their own aberration, the devising of a language barrier was the most effective method of dividing a nation that had undergone centuries of integration by inter-ethnic marriage and communication. By switching alphabets and changing the basic levels of communication like the names of numbers, factions were unable to inter-communicate in the most fundamental elements. To the leader’s advantage, this forced the ethnic groups to solely associate with members of their own community and communicate in the terms of the new power structure. Since the Croatian Education Ministry had

⁴ War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning, Page 33

a far enough reach to demand teachers punish students for the use of non-Croatian terms, it was guaranteed a long lasting role in the framework of power.

This linguistic distortion appears to have had an unfortunate long standing impact on Bosnian society. The redefinition of terms cannot be accused of being the source of the ethnic hatred endemic in the Serbian population, but as Orwell said in Politics and the English Language, “*an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely.*”

The power of the definition of dialog is only useful in the exploitation of existing factions and the reenforcing of existing sociopolitical structures. If these bases exists, the description of terms by the elite has historically been a powerful method of regulating the dialogue and thought process of society. In addition, this also has the beneficial effect of preventing the nation from encountering the types of fractures which ultimately lead to the destruction of a regime or a nation.