



# Royal Bank Letter

Published by Royal Bank of Canada

Vol. 72 No. 1

January/February 1991

## Words, Thoughts and Deeds

*Language has been called the most powerful drug known to humanity. The words we hear and speak can have a distorting effect on our points of view. If we do not want others to take over our minds, we should watch words closely. And never mistake their rhetoric for our own ideas ...*

Some years ago two schools of psychological theory engaged in one of those academic disputes that are as intriguing as they are irresolvable. The issue was whether human thought is formed in words, or whether people "feel" their way to ideas, unconsciously choosing words to describe their thoughts as they go along. One side contended that it is impossible to do any reasoning without using language. The other argued that animals are capable of rudimentary reasoning even though they are incapable of speech.

The debate was still underway when somebody pointed out that, for all practical purposes, it was irrelevant. Human beings might or might not think in words, but without words, their thoughts might as well never have been conceived. As the authors of the composition textbook *Writing and Thinking* put it, "thinking is no better or useful than the thinker's ability to use words to communicate. A scientist who knew the cure for cancer but couldn't explain it to doctors would be of little comfort to cancer patients, and of no use to the medical profession. A college student who says he knows the answer to a question but can't express it gets just as low a grade as the student who frankly says he doesn't know it."

Though language may not be the basis of thinking of every kind, it is clearly essential to the kind most of us do normally. This consists of asking questions to ourselves and trying to arrive at answers that are reasonably clear in our own minds.

If we go on to share with other people the conclusions we have reached, we must then arrange words in logical order in the hope that the others can

understand us. Often the act of putting ideas into sentences for outside consumption has the effect of refining our thoughts, or of suggesting new avenues of thought to follow. In this way language serves not only as a carrier but as a generator of ideas.

To the extent that we think in language, our thoughts are restricted by the number of words at our command and by our sensitivity to their meaning. It follows that to exercise our mental powers fully and to enhance our understanding of life, we should expand and sharpen our vocabularies.

Yet no matter how extensive our knowledge of words, we should be aware that we can never exercise complete control over them. Words are active, changing, slippery things that do not lend themselves to machine-like precision. That is why philosophers like Alfred North Whitehead, whose first discipline was mathematics, have insisted that objective truths cannot be expressed in verbal terms.

Even the unexpressed words we keep in our heads have emotional connotations that can distort our viewpoint. For example, newspapers used to ask celebrities to make lists of the 10 most beautiful words in the language. In these "mother," "home," "children," and "love" consistently ranked high, not because they sounded particularly beautiful in themselves, but because of the things for which they stood.

When such words occur in their thoughts, people susceptible to their emotional appeal are less likely to think matters through in a systematic and objective way than to form opinions out of sentiment. The case of a *mother* who committed a crime for the *love* of

her *children* and in defence of her *home* might be decided in the jurors' minds before they ever go to court.

If words are not trustworthy in the privacy of our heads, they are even less so when they are converted to speech or writing. The French philosopher Montaigne observed that every word is composed of two parts, belonging equally to the speaker and the listener. The dual nature of language makes it necessary for participants in any serious discussion to watch carefully the words both they and the other party choose.

"If you wish to converse with me, define your terms," said Voltaire. In *The Story of Philosophy*, Will Durant commented: "How many a debate would have been deflated into a paragraph if the disputants had dared to define their terms! This is the alpha and omega of logic, the heart and soul of it, that every important term in serious discourse shall be subject to strictest scrutiny and definition."

The definition of words has an effect not only on what we think, but on *how* we think. In *Explorations in Awareness*, J. Samuel Bois described how, in translating French to English, he found that there was no English equivalent of *fleuve*, for a great river running into the sea. English-speakers had to make do with the same word to describe the mighty St. Lawrence and a stream one could throw a stone across. In a later translation job, however, Bois learned that French could accommodate no distinction among the English words "giggle," "titter," and "chuckle." In French, they all were *ricaner*.

"The moral of the story," he wrote, "is that I don't see the same things, I don't observe the same events when I change my English for my French thinking tool. Changing my language changes me as an observer. It changes my world at the same time."

Much is suggested by those words that are included in a national vocabulary and those that are left out. For instance, according to the expatriate Soviet writer and scholar Azary Messerer, "there is no such word as privacy in the modern Russian language. The latest and most comprehensive English-Russian dictionary, edited by Professor I. Galperin, translates 'privacy' as 'loneliness, intimacy, or secrecy' but says nothing about the right to live free from interference in one's private life."

In noting this omission, Messerer was making an ideological point, contrasting the collectivism of the old-line Communists with the individualism of the western democracies. His bias towards the latter brings up one of the basic rules of general semantics: that, as S.I. Hayakawa wrote, "It is important to sort out from any utterance *the information given from*

*the speaker's feeling toward that information.*" Doing so helps us to prevent others from manipulating our thoughts.

Even when we are thinking on our own, however, we would do well to remember that political terms are exceptionally tricky. Take the word "democracy," of which the American writer Bernard Smith observed: "The words men fight and die for are the coins of politics, where by much usage they are soiled and by much manipulating debased. That evidently has been the fate of the word 'democracy.' It has come to mean what anyone wants it to mean."

True enough. Democracy has cropped up in the names of some of the world's most dictatorial jurisdictions, such as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. Generations of absolute tyrants have claimed to be defending democracy as they lined up their opponents in front of firing squads.

"Political" words can also mean drastically different things to people according to where they stand. To the Northern abolitionists in the American Civil War, the words "liberty" and "freedom" meant liberty and freedom for the slaves in the breakaway states of the Confederacy. To the Confederates, they meant the liberty and freedom to secede from the federal union and to maintain slavery.

When it comes to language, the world of politics is like the world of Humpty Dumpty in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*. In it he tells Carroll's heroine Alice that when he uses a word, it means just what he chooses it to mean.

"The question is," says Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

Humpty Dumpty's reply is pure *realpolitik*: "The question is which is to be master — that's all."

In his novel *1984*, George Orwell presented a picture of a bizarre society in which the "Ministry of Truth" dispenses words that mean just what the dictator, Big Brother, wants them to mean. The state language, Newspeak, turns logic inside-out in brazen contempt for the public intelligence. Hence the universal slogan, "War is Peace."

Orwell wrote his cautionary tale in 1948, reversing the last two digits of the year to indicate some time late in the century. Writing in *et cetera*, the journal of general semantics, in the actual year 1984, communications professor Terence P. Moran drew attention to how much the use of language in American politics had come to resemble Orwell's speculations: "In which 1984 do we call the MX nuclear missile 'the Peacekeeper?'" he asked. Professor Moran noted that, when then-President Ronald Reagan ordered the withdrawal of U. S. Marines from Lebanon after they

had suffered heavy casualties, he called it a "redeployment." "This bit of newspeak inspired such historical revisions as 'Napoleon's Redeployment from Moscow' and 'Custer's Last Redeployment,'" Moran wrote.

There is a long tradition of using euphemisms to cover up the real horrors of war. An official dispatch from a battlefield might read: "Elements of the Fourth Division repulsed attacks from the enemy Sixth Army supported by aerial and artillery bombardment. Casualties on both sides were heavy." This says nothing of the hundreds of men who had their stomachs blasted open or their arms, legs or heads blown off. In a similar vein, an American general in Europe once referred to civilian casualties as "collateral damage." An "interdictional nonsuccumber" was how the U.S. Defense Department described a person in Viet Nam who had survived bombing attacks.

Short of war, euphemisms have always been used in politics to candy-coat unpalatable realities. While the words in the mouths of the parties in power are "smoother than butter," as Shakespeare wrote, the language of opposition parties is unadulterated vinegar. The discerning voter will make allowances for the motives behind the words when the government says that a proposed policy will lead to broad new uplands of progress and the opposition says of the same policy that it will bring the ruination of the nation and "the democratic way of life."

Politics, however, is not confined to parliamentary chambers. We think in political terms constantly without being aware of doing so. The power of language starts to influence our political opinions in early childhood. We are all imbued with the prejudices of the particular social group into which we were born, and we receive this indoctrination from the language we hear.

If early in life we "learn" to associate a certain word like the name of an ethnic group with something objectionable to our group, the negative associations are likely to stick in our minds when we reach adulthood. No matter what objective evidence we encounter to the contrary, members of such-and-such a nationality or religion will always be dirty or lazy, drunken or greedy, stingy or crooked, depending on which stereotype we apply to which particular group.

These and other opinions such as those on the role of the sexes are fundamentally political because the images created by language will loom up in our minds when one or the other of these groups makes a bid for a recognition of rights or draws attention to some point of discrimination against them. For the most part, our prejudices are unconscious; they are conditioned by words we use so frequently that they have

become second nature. Consciously or not, we are unlikely to be very sympathetic or fair to people we have been talking about in pejorative language all our lives.

One of the things children learn to do in their preschool years is to "call names" at those who are different from them and their playmates. If they are on the receiving end of the name-calling, they learn to taunt back: "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me!" No saying could be further from the truth.

First of all, words *can* hurt us emotionally, with an effect deeper and more lasting than a physical injury. Secondly, the declaration that words can do no physical harm is fallacious. It is words that cause mobs to pick up sticks and stones to break the bones of the people they have learned to look upon with repugnance or hatred. Words have been responsible for some of the most horrible crimes of humanity. Naziism got its start by calling names.

The Nazis were masters of propaganda, which consists largely of rhetoric. Among the definitions of rhetoric is "language designed to persuade or impress (often with implication of its insincerity, exaggeration, etc.)"

In prison after the abortive Munich *putsch*, Adolf Hitler developed the principles of how to rule men's minds with artful language. He set about becoming a master orator in the full knowledge that, as the English writer Joseph Chatfield said, "Oratory is the power to talk people out of their sober and natural opinions."

Hitler knew how to pick the "right" words for his purposes and to arrange them in slogans which, repeated over and over, could utterly overwhelm non-conformity with party doctrine. He further knew how slogans could obviate public scrutiny of policy and anaesthetize the conscience, wiping out every human consideration in the interests of "the master race."

Of course, propaganda (the Latin-based word stems from the *propagation* of the Roman Catholic faith) was practised long before Hitler came on the scene in the 1920s. What was different from his time on was that propagandists could use mass media such as radio, film and wire services to reach around the world. Everyone everywhere became a potential candidate for what was later known as brain-washing. Then came television, and with it the witch-hunting U. S. Senator Joseph McCarthy, who managed to turn the word "Communist" into a terrifying scourge.

Because it slings words at its listeners with such disconcerting speed, and because the visual images it presents further blur the perceptions, television has heightened the need to be careful not to take words



at face value. Not that anybody does so entirely; everyone knows that television commercials, like all other advertising, make fulsome use of exaggeration. But while we allow for a degree of hyperbole in advertising, we are perhaps less rigorous in discounting the more subtle but no less contrived exaggerations we hear in news and public affairs programs.

Exaggeration is a natural part of language. We all blow words out of proportion to their original meaning, and sometimes depart from their meaning entirely. A good meal isn't literally marvellous, which the dictionary defines as "astonishing" or "extremely improbable." Nor is a bad meal literally terrible — "awful, dreadful, formidable, very great or bad."

Words are often used in a less than literal way to plant desirable ideas. The British Royal Navy, for instance, has traditionally given its ships names like *Invincible* and *Indomitable*, though the Lords of the Admiralty are well aware that no war ship could actually be invincible or indomitable. Presumably they hoped that the sailors aboard them would conduct themselves as if the names proclaimed a simple fact.

These are cases of words meaning not only what people want them to mean, but what people *hope* they will mean. Thus a young man will call a girl his sweetheart in the hope, and with the suggestion, that she will come to fit that description. In black magic, spells are cast and curses made with words the speaker fiercely hopes will become reality.

"The old idea that words possess magical powers is false," Aldous Huxley wrote, "but its falsity is the distortion of a very important truth. Words *do* have a magical effect — but not in the ways that the magicians supposed, and not on the objects that they are trying to influence. Words are magical in the way they affect the minds of those who use them."

It is to tap into this magic that sloganeers try to plant words in the public mind which produce reflexive generalizations. "A good catch word," the American politician Wendell Wilkie once said, "can obscure analysis for fifty years."

Cleverly-chosen language has the effect of simplifying ideas, to the relief of those who are intellectually lazy. Life is rarely as simple as the language we use to describe it. Still, we all generalize, and by doing so we fall into the trap of believing that all things in a certain category are the same: all pigs are dirty, all professors are wise, all women are bad drivers. By attaching generalized labels to the pictures that crop up in our minds, we do an injustice not only to others, but to our better selves.

According to the prophet of general semantics, Alfred Korzybski, the Indo-European language structure, with its strong emphasis on "is" and "is not," tends to make for generalizations and snap judgments. We talk of right and wrong, good and bad, etc., taking little or no notice of the gradations between these extreme states. Such verbal polarization militates against reasonable solutions to problems. Anyone who suggests a middle way between opposites is likely to come under fire from both sides.

The first rule of semantics is that words are nothing but the symbols of things and ideas. To paraphrase Korzybski, language is to reality what the map is to the territory — "the map," he kept repeating, "is not the territory."

It is when words are confused with the things they represent that we run into dangerous delusions. John Kenneth Galbraith called what results from the substitution of a word for a fact a "wordfact."

"It means," he wrote, "that to say something exists is a substitute for its existence. And to say that something will happen is as good as having it happen .... By bold use of the wordfact, we were able to convert South American dictators into bulwarks of the free world."

In this clamorous day and age, independent-minded individuals should be on the constant look-out for wordfacts and other calculated misuses of language. It is not too much for citizens to insist, at least in their own sovereign minds, that the words employed in political discourse mean what they are commonly understood to mean.

If one group calls another "terrorists" or says that they are using "violence" or accuses them of "committing genocide," we should decide for ourselves, on the balance of evidence, whether terrorism or violence or genocide is actually being perpetrated. We should guard against attempts to hijack our thinking by slogans, catch-words, or rhetoric designed to inflame our opinions or turn us against enemies manufactured by "wordfact" techniques.

And we should be ever-conscious of the insidious danger of using packaged words as substitutes for original ideas. We should not allow others, any more than we should allow ourselves, to confuse words with the reality they symbolize. Eternal vigilance as to the use of words is the price of freedom of thought and expression. In a democracy, the war against the misuse of words cannot be a purely public one. Each individual must stand on guard over his or her own mind.

