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During each spring semester for the past twenty-six years, I have spent much of each week visiting high schools to help supervise pre-service teachers in English. In the course of this work, especially over the last several years, I have developed a suspicion about the place of doublespeak in the English language arts curriculum.

What Is Doublespeak?

According to William Lutz, "Doublespeak is language which pretends to communicate but really does not. It is language which makes the bad seem good, something negative appear positive, something unpleasant appear attractive, or at least tolerable" ("Notes" 4). Who is likely to use language in this way, and why might they do so? D. G. Kehl and Howard Livingston give a good answer: "doublespeak in all too many cases is an insidious practice whereby the powerful abuse language to deceive and manipulate for the purpose of controlling public behavior—the public as consumer, as voter, as student—by depriving us of our right to make informed choices" (77). When used in this way, doublespeak is "an effective use of the language of power, the language of control, the language of manipulation" (Lutz, *New Doublespeak* 16).

Most scholars who write about doublespeak stress that in order for a sample of language to count as doublespeak, that sample should be the result of someone's conscious intention to mislead and manipulate others. Hugh Rank provides specific help in distinguishing language that should be classified as doublespeak from language that should not. He stresses that with regard to language use, *"'goodness' or 'badness' depends on the context of the whole situation*; on who is saying what to whom, under what conditions and circumstances, with what intent, and

with what results" ("Mr. Orwell" 23). I agree with Edward P. J. Corbett that this method of analysis "encapsulates the whole art of rhetoric and provides a set of criteria to help us discriminate those uses of language that we should proscribe and those that we should encourage" (16).

Some examples of how this method of analysis can be used are provided by Lutz. For example, he writes that "[w]hen a euphemism is used out of sensitivity for the feelings of someone or out of concern for a social or cultural taboo it is not doublespeak" ("Notes" 4). Thus he would not fault someone for expressing sympathy at a funeral home to a friend or relative by using the euphemism *passed away*. However, in *Doublespeak Defined* he labels as doublespeak the euphemism "diagnostic misadventure of a high magnitude" (71). This phrase, as reported by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in 1988, was used by hospital spokespersons as part of an attempt to cover up an incident when a surgeon accidentally perforated a patient's colon, causing complications that led to the patient's death.

Similarly, Lutz defends jargon as used by members of a well-defined group so that they can "communicate with each other clearly, efficiently and quickly" ("Notes" 5). That is, he does not fault lawyers and tax accountants, in conversations with one another, for using terms such as "involuntary conversion" ("Notes" 5). But "when a member of the group uses jargon to communicate with a person outside the group, and uses it knowing that the non-member does not understand such language, then there is doublespeak" ("Notes" 5). Thus, if a lawyer were to use "involuntary conversion" with people who know nothing about legal terminology, he or she would be using doublespeak.

My Suspicion about Current Secondary English Curricula

When I am visiting high schools, I do occasionally see or hear about teachers using a doublespeak or euphemism quiz (such as the fifty-item quiz that

appears near the end of Lutz's *The New Doublespeak*, or the shorter quizzes offered online by Mary Ellen Guffy (http://www.westwords.com/GUFFEY/euquiz.html) and Wayne Grytting (http://zmagsite.zmag.org/Feb2003/gryttingprint0203.html). And I sometimes see teachers showing students short essays loaded with examples of doublespeak, such as the one by Lutz in his short essay "Life under the Chief Doublespeak Officer" (http://www.dt.org/html/Doublespeak.html). But in my experience, the teachers who use such materials tend to go over them rather quickly, perhaps as introductions to *1984*, and sometimes the teachers seem to be using the materials mainly for purposes of humor. ("You'll never guess what a *wood interdental stimulator* is. Nope. Nope. Not even close. You won't believe it when I tell you—it's a toothpick!")

Memories of my Early Years in the Profession

In some measure, I am struck by what I interpret as slight attention to doublespeak because when I started graduate work in English, back in the early 1970s, doublespeak was a prominent topic of discourse in the profession. In those years, it would have been difficult for anyone associated with the study and teaching of English to be ignorant of developments such as the following:

- At its convention in 1971, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) passed two resolutions having to do with the study of dishonest language: of its uses in carrying out public policy and of some ways in which such language can be combated by means of classroom study.

- One year later the NCTE founded the Committee on Public Doublespeak, which in 1975 began publishing a newsletter about doublespeak (a newsletter that evolved into the *Quarterly Review of Doublespeak*).

- As the Committee on Public Doublespeak continued its work in the seventies, it published two books on doublespeak: *Language and Public Policy* by Hugh Rank (1974), and *Teaching about Doublespeak* by Daniel Dieterich (1976).

- A third Committee-sponsored book came later, in 1989. It is called *Beyond Nineteen Eighty-Four*

and is a collection of essays edited by Lutz, who went on to produce several books on his own about doublespeak. For me, his name will always be closely associated with investigations of the nature and effects of doublespeak.

As I review my early years in the profession, I also recall that sessions at many state and national conferences focused on doublespeak.

Can I prove that thirty or thirty-five years ago teachers of English were paying more attention to the serious issues raised by doublespeak than they do today? I cannot. But if I were to start assembling evidence for a case, I would note that the *Quarterly Review of Doublespeak* ceased to be published in the summer of 2000 and that Lutz's last book about doublespeak appeared in 1999.

Justification for Taking Doublespeak Seriously

Even if I cannot prove what I suspect, I would still urge teachers of English to maintain or create prominent places within their curricula for matters related to doublespeak. In so doing, I echo Professor Corbett, who more than thirty years ago called on English teachers to "regard themselves as *ex officio* members of vigilante committees for the preservation and enhancement of the language" (16). One important reason why I echo this note is that studying doublespeak will lead students to examine some fascinating and powerful samples of language. And once they can identify, understand, and evaluate these samples, they will be better positioned to recognize and work against uses of language that "insult our intelligence, corrupt public discourse, and ultimately undermine that which holds us together as a nation" (Lutz, *New Doublespeak* 5).

There is more than one way to classify kinds of doublespeak. One well-known system has been provided by Lutz ("Notes" 4-6). I have developed a system with somewhat different categories of the structures and techniques that doublespeakers can use in attempts to confuse, deceive, and manipulate. These categories are laid out and described below:

Rare or Invented Words

Sometimes doublespeakers use words that are extremely rare. Sometimes they take rare words and

associate them with unexpected meanings. And sometimes they seem to invent words. By themselves, all such words can confound readers and listeners. For example, consider the verb "subaquate" (Lutz, *Doublespeak Defined* 66). Most English teachers have probably studied Latin or probably know enough about Latin roots and derivatives to recognize that this word has something to do with being under water. The shock comes in learning that this word has actually been used in place of the verb *drown.*

When such words appear as parts of phrases, their potential to frustrate and confuse increases. Probably you can guess what "compensated edentia" has been used to refer to—false teeth (Lutz, *Doublespeak Defined* 68). But what about "vehicular malscrusion" (Lutz, *Doublespeak Defined* 2)? The *Oxford English Dictionary* has no entry for *malscrusion,* but the *mal-* made me confident that this phrase could not refer to something positive. Still, I was startled to learn that "vehicular malscrusion" has been used to refer to an automobile accident.

Contradictions in Terms

Sometimes doublespeakers form constructions out of terms with meanings that clash. These contradictions can be almost impossible for readers and listeners to make sense of. Three good examples have as one of their constituents a form of the word *negative*: "negative advancement," "retain employees negatively," and "negative gain in test scores" (Lutz, *Doublespeak Defined* 79, 84, and 111, respectively). Most people, I believe, would encounter a phrase such as "negative advancement" and say to themselves something like, "Advancement means to move ahead or up or toward something better. How can any such movement be negative?" Once they have spent some time reading about doublespeak, however, they will probably not be shocked that the three constructions cited above have been used to refer, respectively, to a demotion, to the firing of employees, and to low test scores or a drop in test scores.

More serious are contradictory constructions having to do with matters of life and death. For instance, the U. S. Department of Defense is on record as using "conduct coercive diplomacy" to refer to the act of bombing (Lutz, *Doublespeak Defined* 23). And as incredible as it might seem, "[t]he U. S. Navy calls the concept of low-intensity conflict 'violent peace'" (38).

Euphemisms

Euphemisms are similar to contradictions in that, while in contradictions the meaning of one term seems distant from the meaning of another, in euphemistic expressions the meaning of the euphemism seems distant from the reality it refers to. The greater such distance and the less overall contextual support, the harder these expressions are to understand. Some euphemisms probably do no serious harm to society. In fact, some people might find some euphemisms mildly humorous, as when a janitor is referred to as an "entropy control engineer" (Lutz, *Doublespeak Defined* 145), or when a hallway is labeled a "behavior-transition corridor" (108). Other euphemisms, however, are decidedly more serious: consider the expression "nonfacile manipulation of newborn" (66) as used to refer to dropping a baby; or consider the phrase "intergenerational intimacy" as used to refer to pedophilia (60).

Among some of these euphemisms with very serious implications are those that are almost impossible to figure out on one's own. Perhaps you can guess that when a "patient failed to fulfill his wellness potential" (Lutz, *Doublespeak Defined* 42), that patient died. But who would ever be able on his or her own to guess that the expression "hard landing" (4) has been used to describe a helicopter crash that killed six Marines and injured eleven others? Similarly, who would ever be able to guess—even if the context clearly related to warfare—that a "decommissioned aggressor quantum" (27) has been used to refer not to some hostile atomic particle but to a dead enemy soldier?

Misleading Metaphors

As many cognitive linguists have pointed out, metaphors play a large role in helping us organize and understand our experience. We use them to help make sense of everything from debate ("I demolished his argument") to romance ("She conquered my heart"). What doublespeakers sometimes do is to construct metaphors that first attract our attention because the metaphors are so unusual, and then confuse and mislead us. Consider the metaphor in "incontinent ordnance" (Lutz, *New Doublespeak* 32). I was startled when I first saw this expression, and I was not at all sure what it could mean.

Without some outside help, I might never have learned that this expression was used by U. S. officials during the first Gulf War to refer to bombs that missed their targets and caused what has become known as *collateral damage.*

What could possibly lead people to represent off-target bombs as incontinent? My suspicion is that the doublespeakers' thinking goes something like this: "If we label a bomb incontinent, perhaps we can lead people to think that the bomb itself lacks self-control. If a bomb lacks self-control, then it must be possible for it to have self-control in the first place. That possibility, of course, invests the bomb with possible agency or willpower. And once we get people to this stage of thought, then it is not much of a mental step for them to think that it's the bomb's fault for missing its target." At that point doublespeakers have effectively masked the human agents who might well be at fault when a bomb misses its target.

Hard-to-interpret Noun Phrases

Often doublespeakers use noun phrases that are very difficult to interpret. As we will see, some of the difficulty can be due to the fact that these noun phrases are occasionally quite long. And some of the difficulty can be due to the fact that these noun phrases sometimes include terms that are rare or invented. For example, the noun phrase "ideogram illumination intensity adjustment potentiometer" (Lutz, *Doublespeak Defined* 15) has been used to refer to a light switch. But a large part of the difficulty in interpreting these noun phrases has to do with the position of the information that modifies the head noun in each phrase. When we construct a noun phrase, we have a choice of whether to express modifying information before the head noun (premodification—for example, with an adjective) or after the head noun (postmodification—for example, with an adjective clause). It is important to realize that, in general, "premodification is to be interpreted (and, most frequently, can only be interpreted) in terms of postmodification and its greater explicitness. That is, *some tall college girls* will be interpreted as 'some girls who are tall and who are (studying) at a college'" (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik 1243).

What I want most to draw your attention to is the fact that a noun phrase with premodification of the head noun is usually shorter than a noun phrase that has equivalent information postmodifying the head noun. However, because of a relative lack of explicitness, a noun phrase with premodification of the head noun can be very difficult to understand. And producing noun phrases that are difficult or nearly impossible to understand appears to be the goal of many doublespeakers. Why else label a pencil sharpener a "manually operated graphitic marking device acuitization system" (Lutz, *Doublespeak Defined* 169)? Or why else call a traffic signal an "electronically adjusted, color-coded, vehicular flow control mechanism" (7)? Finally, why else call a wastepaper basket a "user-friendly, space-effective, flexible deskside sortation unit" (18)?

Doublespeak and Our Brave New World of Communication on the Internet

After examining several kinds of linguistic elements and techniques commonly used by doublespeakers, you might well agree with Lutz that "such language strikes at the very core of an ordered, just, and virtuous society; such language promotes the deterioration of the social, moral, and political structure upon which all of us depend" (Lutz, *New Doublespeak* 216). If you do agree with Lutz, then surely you will see doublespeak as sufficiently serious to merit deep and sustained attention in our English classrooms. Fortunately for all who wish to teach about doublespeak, there is much pedagogical advice available in such publications as Dieterich's *Teaching About Doublespeak*, Kehl and Livingston's "Doublespeak Detection for the English Classroom," and the last chapter of Lutz's *The New Doublespeak.*

What I think we need significant help with at this time is discovering how today's secondary students are most seriously affected by doublespeak. When I first started to reflect on this need, I focused on specific areas of life in which students might be affected by doublespeak. I suspected that their first serious encounter with doublespeak would come in the form of written offers for credit cards. That suspicion proved to be wrong, at least according to the modest number of high-school students I have been able to interview. Those students said that doublespeak appears in their lives before the time when they receive offers in the

mail for credit cards. They focused on contracts for cell phones, applications for car loans, and forms associated with car insurance. One student, in fact, told me she "couldn't understand a single word" of her car-insurance policy.

As I reflected on the possible presence of doublespeak in students' lives, however, I realized that my focus on specific areas of life had led me to overlook a powerful general force affecting nearly all of our students in a great many areas of their lives: electronic communication, especially electronic communication made possible by the Internet. And it became quite clear to me that trying to decide whether various samples of language available on the Internet were examples of doublespeak or not is and will be a most formidable task for us.

> *My overall point is that communication on the Internet has opened up for all of us some enormous challenges in deciding whether samples of language are examples of doublespeak or not.*

Imagine that some of your students decided to follow up on some rumors they had heard to the effect that re-using plastic bottles could be hazardous to their health. Imagine further that while doing research about this particular matter, they found in a blog the noun phrase *polyvinyl chloride re-use toxicological properties and carcinogenic potential*. If they came to you with questions about his expression, should you encourage them to see it as an example of doublespeak? Similarly, imagine that some of your students, while doing research associated with their study of Wiesel's *Night*, found on a website the expression *historic rehabilitation of the Third Reich through negationism*. Again, if they were to ask you for advice about what this expression means and how they should respond to it, should you encourage them to see it and respond to it as an example of doublespeak?

Finally, imagine that a few of your students showed you a paper copy of an email that they had received. The email appeared to be sent from the bank where they had checking accounts, and it said that the bank was in the middle of an *account security maintenance update process*. To ensure that the process could be completed accurately, all the students had to do was supply their names and account numbers. Should you urge them to comply, or should you warn them that this is another example of doublespeak, one that is associated with an attempted swindle? I have a good idea about what you would do, but I must admit that when such messages first started circulating on the Internet, I once came perilously close to providing information about my checking account; after all, I thought, a communication that looked so official and carried the actual name of my bank almost had to be authentic.

My overall point is that communication on the Internet has opened up for all of us some enormous challenges in deciding whether samples of language are examples of doublespeak or not. Let me start to defend this claim by making just a few comments in connection with most of the variables that Professor Rank associates with "*the context of the whole situation*":

- The "who" and "with what intent": I read blogs by people I know and respect. But I also come across blogs produced by people I do not know and cannot learn very much about. Furthermore, I come across blogs produced by people using assumed names. And I also encounter anonymous blogs; in fact, on the day when I wrote this sentence, I found information on a website about how to write on the Internet and keep your identity absolutely secret. As the Internet continues to develop, it will probably become more and more difficult to learn enough about writers and their histories to evaluate their credibility. And we may not be able to do much more than guess about their intentions.

- The "to whom": People and corporations have used and continue to use mass mailings, and companies have used and continue to use advertisements on radio and television. But not one of those media, I believe, has the same power as the Internet to reach such a large and expanding audience. Thus it might well become impossible to evaluate a sample of language in the light of whom it was intended for.

- The "under what conditions and circumstances": Similar comments apply to the conditions and circumstances of information disseminated on the Internet. In the cases of many messages, we cannot discover when they were composed, where they were composed, how they were composed, why they

were composed, with whom they might have been composed, and for how long the messages were supposed to remain valid (although we may have suspicions about some of these matters).

- The "results": I would never claim that before the Internet people did not use doublespeak to do terrible things to others; some of the examples of doublespeak that I cited above were used before the extensive development of the Internet, and those examples did in fact harm others. Thus I will not now charge the Internet with being the first medium to allow people to harm others with language (whether or not the net allows new forms of harm with language would be an interesting subject to pursue at another time). What I will charge the Internet with is making the extent of possible harm almost incalculably great. Consider the three examples I cited above: In the cases of the information about re-using plastic bottles, about rehabilitating the reputation of the Third Reich (usually through Holocaust denial), and about checking-account numbers, how many people could be led into faulty judgments and harmful actions? A million? One hundred million? Even more? To generalize, I would say that whatever kind of linguistic action a form of communication on the net is trying to perform, it has the potential—without great effort or expense on the communicator's part—to perform that action, over time, on billions of people. And if the linguistic action is harmful, the communication has the potential to harm billions of people.

Thus in most cases the challenge of judging potential doublespeak on the Internet will be very great indeed. But I sincerely hope that English teachers will work together to take on this challenge with their students. For in my view, this challenge connects to some of the most important issues of communication and communication ethics that we will ever face in our classrooms.

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