

Language of Live Men

By EDWARD L. BERNAYS

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He has been adviser to Presidents and has represented our government in numerous activities. In between times he has become the author of "Propaganda," "Crystallizing Public Opinion," "Speak Up for Democracy," and "Take Your Place at the Peace Table."

FOR the past quarter of a century, we have had occasion to employ college graduates, M.A.'s and Ph.D.'s, in activities based on the communication of ideas through words. Though many of these had finished school with high marks in English, some of them revealed an extraordinary lack of sensibility for the language. They were unable to link their thought with the ability to articulate it precisely in terms of its significance, or to overcome the semantic tyranny of individual words. As a result, they often said things which had little or nothing to do with the actual meaning they wanted to convey.

This is a common failing. People usually know, in their own minds and hearts, what they are trying to express. But they are often too intent upon getting it out of their system as a form of catharsis, or too slow in finding the words which correspond exactly to their meaning; and, in most cases, they take

little trouble to examine objectively what it is that they have managed to get out of their system. They have said it and are done with it. Yet we know that the individual words, so cavalierly used in what is said, have many meanings and nuances which bear no relation to the idea struggling for expression.

That is one reason why it is a mistake to restrict the teaching of English to formal grammar, spelling, punctuation, syntax, correct letter writing, a few generally accepted literary classics and nothing else. This is important as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough. To function successfully in our highly conscious twentieth century, the student must also learn the connotative and denotative effect of words. He must master the use of words as Hayakawa defines them, as language in action related to the social context.

Unfortunately, many people look upon words as convenient signs in a dictionary which have only to be strung together in some sort of beaded structure in order to make sense. Obviously, this type of word usage can have little effect in conveying information, suggesting attitudes, or persuading others to adopt a course of action. To teach English in this antiquated spirit is to cripple the student's education, and render him useless for carrying on informational activities or exercising leadership in our democracy.

To understand the exact connotation of words is directly related to democracy. On the eve of World War II, a great American poet, Archibald MacLeish, pointed out that we had become victims of propaganda. Words had won World War I and lost the peace that followed. As a result, we had all become highly suspicious of words.

Because we are still highly suspicious, it is all the more important for English teachers everywhere to make it clear that mankind is no longer cannon fodder for propaganda of the word. The Thirty Years' War which has marked this "age of anxiety" has compelled all major ideas to move from the propaganda of the word to the propaganda of the deed. This in turn has demanded of all concerned, in no matter what camp, to implement their ideas by the most scrupulous use of the specific word which unmistakably and unequivocally means the specific action. In the great struggle of creeds, new and old, which seek to determine the shape of things to come, there can be no room for doubt as to what anyone means by the words he uses.

Against this background, English seems to me the most important of all subjects taught in our school system, since to understand all other subjects it is first imperative to understand English. This was always true, but particularly so today when science and philosophy are inclined to agree that language and thought are identical. The reciprocal law is that fuzzy thinking is fuzzy speech; fuzzy speech, fuzzy action; and vice versa.

Besides—and this is a key aspect of the problem—we live in an age when there is a great cultural lag in our understanding of human and social relations, as compared to our understanding of the physical sciences. We understand scientific terms with considerable precision in their modern scientific and industrial context. We are not so fortunate in the social sciences, in politics, or in the human relations of industry. This is due, in part, to the widespread use of abstract portmanteau words which mean different things to different people, words like *liberty, freedom, justice, democracy, socialism*.

This Babel of meanings attached to the same abstract word often leads to national, inter-group and even intra-group misunderstandings, and sometimes only the most rigorous use of language can untie these knots in human relations.

An example of the power of language (and one, I like to think, socially constructive) occurred in my own experience. We once handled the public relations of a company which manufactured prefabricated houses. At that time, this was a new product which literally revolutionized housing, and the company said so in its advertisements. It boasted of its new, *revolutionary* housing. The American public, however, reacts negatively to the word *revolution*, and the company had a hard time selling its product. They came to me for advice. The solution to your problem, I told them, is easy; just drop the "R." You must be joking, they said. Not at all, I said; try it and see what happens. They tried it. What

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happened was that their new *evolutionary* housing sold like hot cakes. They cashed in on the objective social fact that Darwin has a greater influence on the American public than Emma Goldman.

Misunderstandings due to words happen every day in the United States within and between the various groups which make up the American people upon whose unity the welfare of our country depends. In a labor contract, for example, there may be references to hours of work, wages, equal pay for equal work and so on. But these phrases are so loose that they are bound to leave a good deal of room for all kinds of interpretations. Equal to what, for instance? Is the standard of measurement to be quantity or quality of output?

In a competitive society like ours, there are many reasons for misunderstanding in the continual struggle for security and preeminence and their profound effect upon the emotions. These misunderstandings can be greatly intensified by the false word, and eased by the right one.

Leaders in charge of American foreign policy are today acutely aware of the importance of language in communicating ideas. Significant was the recent statement by Acting Secretary of State Robert A. Lovett that foreign policy can no longer be handled by the diplomat alone. One of the major problems is to explain policy not merely to the technician, Mr. Lovett said, "but to the great mass of the public of the world."

At this point in the twentieth century crisis, language assumes a primary role. If the great mass of the global public is to understand what is really going on, then the experts who undertake to explain it all, and the millions who eagerly listen for guidance, must both be trained in the precise use of words.

Everywhere, however, the power of stimulating a desired attitude or course of action is closely connected with the power to use words precisely. Since in this country the words are English great responsibility, opportunity and privilege rest upon our English teachers.

If our schools are to prepare our young people to function successfully in our democracy, they must do so first of all through our language, which alone enables us to communicate with each other. And the emphasis must be not on the mere mechanics of language, but on teaching our young people first to know what idea they actually want to convey, then in using the exact language necessary for conveying the idea to the group for which it is intended.

In the long run, the battle is lost or won in the public mind, and our security is partly in the hands of the English teacher who can train his pupils to understand the real meaning of words, the actions they stand for and the fate they presage for America and the world.

This article by publicist Bernays is part of a projected series which will attempt to help us see ourselves and our efforts as leaders in the community see us and evaluate the results of our teaching.