

# Decoding the Language of War. The Art of Deceiving and Sidetracking

Pietro de Perini\*

## 1. Newspeak or Language of War?

In order to understand Orwell's *Newspeak*, the author himself wrote a clear explanatory text in the Appendix of his famous novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; in modern times the world is constantly facing a language that is quite far from *Newspeak*, but effectively shows certain analogies, and unfortunately no one is totally able to explain it to us.

Orwell in his famous explanation of *Newspeak* wrote that:

[...] its vocabulary was so constructed as to give exact and often very subtle expression to every meaning that a Party member could properly wish to express, while excluding all other meaning and also the possibility of arriving at them by indirect methods. This was done partly by the invention of new words, but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words and stripping such words as remained of unorthodox meanings, and so far as possible all secondary meaning whatever [...]

then, speaking about the *B Vocabulary* (the political one), he continues:

[...] it consisted of words which had been deliberately constructed for political purposes: words, that is to say, which not only had in every case a political implication, but were intended to impose a desirable mental attitude upon the person using them.

Obviously the power of our contemporary language of war is not so intense but some dynamics are similar and its effects are certainly stronger than one could initially think. This happens, above all, because, somehow, the people desire to be deceived; Robert Fisk says:

It is not a question that the government is trying to beat the public into submission to their views. The public and the press are ready to accept their views. That's the tragedy!<sup>1</sup>

\* University of Padua graduate in Foreign Languages and Communication Science.

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Mr. Robert Fisk, February 2004, by Pietro de Perini.

Many critics, professors and journalists often quote this similarity between Orwell's *Newspeak* and the language of war in the internet but they generally force it. This binomial is just a point of reference to understand how the language of war behaves and its analysis is useful to appreciate the following.

## 2. The Dictionary of the Language of War

This language of war is essentially intended as a glossary of terms that have more than one level of meaning propaganda aims. The word *fixing* for example sounds totally innocuous, but in wartime it has another meaning. The US and the British forces during the second war in Iraq (*Operation Iraqi freedom*) have said many times to *have fixed* the towns of Nassirya and Bassra. This does not mean they were repairing the damage caused during their attack. It means that they had sealed off the perimeters to neutralise any Iraqi troop still inside. Another term with a similar double meaning is *mouseholing*, used to describe elements of urban warfare in which troops do not enter houses from the front door for fear of triggering trip wires. Instead they blow holes in sidewalls, often causing civilian casualties.

The term *dead-enders*, first coined by General Tommy Franks, leader of the Anglo-American troops, is one of the clearest examples of how the language of war works. *Dead-ender* was first used to describe all those Iraqi civilians who took up arms in the desperate attempt of avoiding Western invasion, because they knew they could not have opportunities in a post-Saddam government. Therefore the brand-new term *dead-ender* can be seen as a kind of synonym of the already existing word *rebel* or even *freedom fighter* from another point of view. Why then, did the Bush Administration use this term to introduce the Iraqi «resistance» to the American public? There are several reasons. First of all, playing on the metaphor of the dead end, they underlined the fact that any attempt of resisting against US troops was hopeless and useless: by using a new word they avoided giving their audience the message that, in fact, there was a large group of resisters that did not want the Anglo-American invasion (and they hid the fact that these rebels were primarily civilians).

The spin sounds quite crude, but it worked, at least in the beginning of the war. Now the Administration prefers to use the term

*insurgents*, taken from the expression used to describe civilians from Virginia and Massachusetts who rose up in revolt against the Crown during American Civil War, even because after one year of terror acts, killings and disorders the metaphor of the «dead end» does not convey anymore.

A personal research made on some updated international search engines proves that the most famous and checked word of the contemporary language of war is the term *embed*. This word is part of the set of terms used to describe war reporters during this war in Iraq: *sojo*, *unilateral* and of course *embed*. *Embed* is used to describe the new tendency of sending reporters to the battlefield together with the Army. *Embedded* journalists have been sleeping, eating and living with the soldiers. This should have been useful to obtain reliable news from the front, but obviously these journalists could only report the soldiers' stories. A *unilateral* is, on the contrary, a journalist not embedded with the Army who makes his way through the war zone. They have reported the war in the most reliable way, but actually most of the journalists killed during operation Iraqi Freedom, were *unilaterals*. Finally *sojo* means solo journalist and is used to describe a reporter who is able to broadcast from the battlefield without a crew.

Euphemisms are generally used without giving too much relevance to their power, which is generally huge. The expressions *collateral damage* and *unintended consequences* are normally used instead of *civilian casualties*, but if the meaning is the same, the rendering is very different. Just think about the different images you would have in your mind when reading a headline like: «Cluster bombs render much collateral damage in Baghdad» as opposed to reading: «Cluster bombs kill 50 civilians in Baghdad». The difference is enormous, but it is only in the words chosen; notice the power of language. Francis Beer, Professor of social sciences at Boulder University (CO, USA), once said something interesting about language and power, he said: «if you just focus on your own grief and your own meaning, you are not going to get the best possible outcome. Different patterns of actions unfold from different interpretations», and then he added: «the initial words chosen by political leaders to describe an impending conflict are human, direct and filled with powerful images designed to evoke an emotional response. It is a pattern found in all the major conflicts». Like in Orwell's invented language a great part of the language of war is created by euphemisms. British Air Marshall Brian

Burridge coined the expression *to break the china* a horrible euphemism for *blow up houses...* of course when someone blows up a house he destroys everything inside it, including the porcelain dishes. When talking about these kinds of language tricks it is not possible to forget the famous nickname chosen for the destructive «dumb bomb» *BLU-82* (where *BLU* stands for Bomb Live Unit): *Daisy Cutter*. This term also won the award for the most euphemistic term of the year, given by the American Dialect Society in 2001. They justified this award saying that the bomb does not actually cut daisies, it atomises them and everything around them. Even the last huge «smart bomb», which has luckily not been used yet, the *M.O.A.B.*, has a nickname that makes its meaning sound softer: the original meaning of the acronym *M.O.A.B.* is *Massive Ordnance Air Bomb*, but a large part of the world knows it humoristically as the *Mother Of All Bombs*, as it has been presented by the Pentagon. Another horrible euphemism is the term *play doh*, which is a famous brand of modelling clay for children, but is also used in wartime as a synonym for plastic explosive.

*Decapitation strike* is in fact an expression used to describe the attempt of decapitating Saddam Hussein and his regime with precise, guided strikes. This term is curious because it is the only euphemism in the glossary of the language of war that refers to the act of killing people.

Even the old-fashioned expression *friendly fire*, referring to the act of killing soldiers of the same side, has changed. Since the amount of *friendly fire* accident during this war has been huge, the military preferred to use the phrase *blue on blue* that comes from war exercises where the good guys are in blue and the bad guys in red (and where the red for bad guys come from the Cold War era).

Another strong language weapon is the metaphor. George Lakoff, the famous American linguist, has written much about the misuse of metaphors in his books and essays, but his arguments are a little more technical. There are simpler examples of the power of these language constructions. The metaphor of «declaring war on \_\_\_\_» as professor Ross Glover notes in his essay entitled «the war on \_\_\_\_»<sup>2</sup> is deeply established in the American minds. In American history every problem, even social problems, have been fought as a war. There was the war on alcohol, the war on poverty, the war on communism and so on.

<sup>2</sup> Clover Ross, «The War on \_\_\_\_», from *Collateral Language*, New York, New York University Press, 2002.

### 3. Tricks of Mass Deception

The language of war, as intended in this article, is part of a bigger group of sophisticated propaganda tricks. The preferred expression used – especially in the internet – to describe the entire group of propaganda strategies is «weapons of mass deception». They generally include marketing, visual propaganda, disinformation, lies, the use of fear and, of course the language tricks which have been analysed above. A good example of visual propaganda is given by the image the world has seen when the Anglo-American troops entered Baghdad. Most of the newspapers and media talked about a jubilant crowd and then talking about the statue of Saddam Hussein, they said that a big crowd of American Marines and Iraqi civilians pulled down the statue. The news media showed this event and the general idea was that there was really a big jubilant crowd of people there, pulling down the statue. Good cut and good visual propaganda. Some web sites, a few days after that event, uploaded pictures taken from a hill that gave a panoramic sight of the square in the moment of the fall of the statue. The pictures show clearly that a small group of jubilant Iraqi civilians was around the statue with the Marines but the square was actually almost empty and surrounded by tanks and armed soldiers. Even a picture provided by the Reuters, showed that Firdos Square was almost empty; a photographic sequence broadcast by the BBC, showed that during the fall of the statue there was only a small crowd of about 200 people<sup>3</sup>.

The use of marketing is even more astonishing. To reverse the image of America as the great Satan among the Muslim world, the Bush Administration, put in charge Charlotte Beers, a famous public adviser who made her way selling food products and shampoos. She asked the Congress for a lot of money (about \$ 594 million) and used it to make opinion polls among the Muslim communities. She tried to sell the concept of a good America using Muslim celebrities as testimonials (Mohammed Ali, Hakeem Olajuwon). She organised television broadcasts inside and outside the US («Can a woman stop terrorism?» and «Next Chapter») and prepared a campaign of advertisements called «Shared Values». The ads of the «Shared Values» campaign showed Muslim-Americans having fun and playing with their children in their American houses and going to work. It all sounded a little fabricated. The problem was that Beers avoided

<sup>3</sup> Pictures of this event can be found easily on a search engine on the net, or at this URL: <http://xoomer.virgilio.it/languageofwar>.

talking about the issues that are at the centre of the Muslim resentment for America, like the foreign policy in the Middle East. However the result of this big and expansive attempt of «selling the war» was a big failure. In Egypt – one of the most friendly states to US – the percentage of people who declared to have a good opinion of America was under 7%; Beers resigned two months before the war started for unspecified health reasons. Lies are a group apart. Obviously the strategy of a lie is to remain not discovered, but many times this does not happen and this double-edged weapon has hit a lot of power heads. An example of a lie discovered from the first Gulf War is the one about «Nayrah» a Kuwaiti teenager. In 1990 this young girl, in tears, said in front of the Congress that when she was working as a volunteer in a Kuwaiti hospital she saw with her own eyes some Iraqi soldiers entering the hospital taking babies from the incubators and letting them die on the cold floor. This atrocious report shocked the world and played a large role in the final decision to attack Iraq. Two years after the truth emerged that nothing was true and Nayrah was actually the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to the US; but the war was won and it did not matter anymore. Another recent lie to hit the Blair Administration was that in trying to connect Saddam Hussein with al-Qaeda they gave to the UN Council a document copied from a paper written in 1990 by a post graduated student, Dr Ibrahim al-Marashi. This lie was immediately discovered and Blair just apologised saying that they had prepared the document as fast as possible and forgot to ask permission from the author. Even the British Intelligence, MI6, contributed to the discovering of this lie, leaking a document to the BBC that explained that they did not have any evidence that al-Qaeda and present day Iraq were linked and that they did not provide that paper. The document copied by the British Administration was however 13 years old and was written by al-Marashi about a previous time period when Iraq had really possessed weapons of mass destruction.

#### **4. Past, Present and Future**

The historical point of reference for the language of war is, by all means, sir Winston Churchill, the statesman who – as John Fitzgerald Kennedy once said – marshalled the English language

and sent it to battle. Actually Churchill's speeches, or better, the concepts used in his speeches and the words used to describe them had an important role in the victory of the Second World War. British soldiers were encouraged by those words; they were driven to fight on gallantly by the words of their leader. This is one of the reasons why, nowadays, Winston Churchill and his speeches are still quoted largely, especially since the so-called war on terror has started. Robert Fisk, who made his Ph-D studying Winston Churchill and his words, ensures that the past British Prime Minister is not quoted but misquoted and misrepresented; his words are misused and moreover political heads are using phrases he never said.

American Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld quoted one of Churchill's most fortunate sentences when he was asked if it was possible that the Department of Defence would be authorised to lie to the news media in order to increase the chances of success of a military operation. He answered: «of course this conjures up Winston Churchill's famous phrase when he said sometimes the truth is so precious that it must be accompanied by a bodyguard of lies». Even American President George W. Bush, has declared himself an admirer of Churchill's defiance of the Axis powers and appeared to have been aiming for the cadence and sentiments of his speeches, but with less effect of course.

Comparing two speeches, the idea of this attempt of copying is easier to understand; in the first one delivered in December 1939, Churchill, in cabinet, invoked the principles of the League in support of his proposal to pre-emptively invade neutral Norway to deprive Hitler of iron ore; the second was given by Bush some hours before the beginning of the Iraqi conflict in support of his proposal to pre-emptively attack Iraq to avoid a possible future danger.

We are fighting to re-establish the reign of law and to protect the liberties of small countries. Our defeat would mean an age of barbaric violence, and would be fatal, not only to ourselves, but to the independent life of every small country in Europe. Acting in the name of the... League [of Nations] and all it stands for, we have a right, indeed are bound in duty, to abrogate [stop] for a space some of the conventions of the very laws we seek to consolidate and reaffirm. Small nations must not tie our hands when we are fighting for their rights and freedom. The letter of the law must not in supreme emergency obstruct those who are charged with its protection and enforcement.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> W. Churchill, *The Speech of December 1939*, in «The Jewish World Review», December 1939, at URL: <http://www.jewishworldreview.com/0203/blankley020503.asp>.

More than 35 countries are giving crucial support [...] to help with intelligence and logistics to deployment of combat units. Every nation in this coalition has chosen to bear the duty and share the honour of serving in our common defence. To all the men and women of the United States armed forces now in the Middle East, the peace of a troubled world and the hopes of an oppressed people now depend on you. That trust is well placed. The enemies you confront will come to know your skill and bravery. The people you liberate will witness the honourable and decent spirit of the American military. In this conflict America faces an enemy that has no regard for conventions of war or rules of morality.<sup>5</sup>

The term *axis of evil* was coined by President Bush to describe those states that are accused of seeking weapons of mass destruction and being a constant and growing danger for the world population. This axis is another reference to the Second World War and to Winston Churchill; it includes: North Korea, Iraq and Iran (but maybe now Syria has taken Iraqi position in the axis) and the common usage of this term prepares the American population for the possibility of going to war against the countries that are part of the axis. The term *axis of weevils* was ironically coined to describe those allied nations that did not support *operation Iraqi Freedom*, like France and Germany that were sarcastically called by Donald Rumsfeld *old Europe*.

However, the language of war is now enjoying a hey-day. It is studied and criticised by many scholars and experts and as wars seem to be a regular presence in our lives, it will probably increase. Every forecast about the future of the language of war has a pessimistic tone. Fisk says that this sector of language changes only slightly. Knightley and Huggler argue that it is not possible to have an idea of how the language of war is going to behave, there are no rules: «I have no predictions! Who would have dreamed up embeddings»<sup>6</sup>, Knightley argued.

Sadly the only path to follow in order to understand and discover the mutations of this sector of (English<sup>7</sup>) language is to survive and keep on analysing it day-by-day, war-by-war.

<sup>5</sup> G.W. Bush, *The Speech of March 20th 2003*, in «The Guardian Online», 20 March 2003 (transcription).

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Mr Knightley, December 2003-January 2004, by Pietro de Perini.

<sup>7</sup> Even if this article is about the English language of war every language has at least its small part dealing with this topic.

## 5. Defenceless?

The interest and the curiosity created by the profound analysis of the language of war may hide its negative connotations. As seen,

this subdivision of language is increasing and mixing together with other weapons of mass deception. Journalists, military heads and even politicians regularly use it. There is only a small group of people who are still fighting to render the language of mass communication clearer, more precise and honest.

Since the massive use of the terms of the language of war does not depend on the quality of the newspaper, the visibility of the TV news broadcast or the positioning of whatever politician, there are evident difficulties in finding reliable points of reference.

Providing that even the big World Wide Web is infected with massive and systematic disinformation, the only real place it is still possible to find free information in a fair language is the blog community. One of the most famous blogs is the one entitled «Where is Raed?» updated daily by Salam Pax and Raed, two Iraqi young boys. «The Guardian» discovered this blog and made a book about it, which has been translated into many languages including Italian<sup>8</sup>.

Other self-defence points of reference include the websites F.A.I.R. (fairness and accuracy in reporting), and CounterPunch. These people are working together to protect the world population and their right not to be deceived.

Here is a list of useful links:

- [http://dear\\_raed.blogspot.com/](http://dear_raed.blogspot.com/)

The famous blog from Baghdad.

- <http://www.fair.org>

FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting) homepage

- <http://www.counterpunch.com>

Counterpunch homepage; America's best political newsletter.

- <http://xoomer.virgilio.it/languageofwar>

My website, point of reference for every piece I write about this topic (it contains the glossary of the language of war, pictures, thoughts).

<sup>8</sup> S. Pax, *Baghdad Blog* (originally *The Clandestine Diary of an Ordinary Iraqi*) Atlantic Books, 2003; Italian edition: Milan, Sperling & Kupfer, 2003.