

On the Purity of Language

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By Butler Shaffer

I did something the other day that I only occasionally do: watched a major league baseball game on television. One of the sportscasters covering the game was a man who can clearly be said to be an authority on both baseball and sportscasting. His use of words, therefore, can be said to have significance beyond that of your illiterate-ballplayer-turned-sportscaster who characteristically employs incorrect verb tenses, splits infinitives, or uses prepositions to end sentences on. Thus, I was a bit concerned when he described one player — who was at bat — as a "hitter," and then corrected himself: "I should say u2018batter,' not u2018hitter.' There are purists out there."

The point this man was making, of course, was that a player swinging a bat is, indeed, only a "batter" and becomes a "hitter" only when he has gotten a hit. It's a little like referring to a player who gets a hit and ends up on first base as a "base-runner," even though he remains on first base until the inning is over. In many areas of human endeavor, we have become accustomed to misusing words. Just as many conservatives are inclined to regard a policeman who violates the Constitution as a defender of "law and order," most of us tend to get rather lazy and sloppy in the use of language. Since this particular occurrence involved only a baseball game, one might respond "so what?"

The sportscaster, himself, seemed to regard the distinction between a "batter" and a "hitter" as a de minimis matter, one that could only be of interest to some small handful of language "purists" who might take offense. After all, can't the game go on without taking time out to resolve the issue of whether player "X" is a "batter" or a "hitter?" The short-run answer to that question is obviously "yes," but in the long run it is questionable whether this game — or any other — can continue with the proliferation of blurred distinctions that flow from using words with increasingly fuzzy meanings.

Let us consider the problems that could arise in baseball alone. I remember when my childhood friends and I were first introduced to the game of baseball. It was common for many of us to say that a player who had hit a double, and later ran from second base to home had "scored a home run." The older kids made it a point to correct the younger ones on their terminology. Would this sportscaster contend that only a language "purist" would want to quarrel with such word usage? And what of the rules of the game that address themselves to "hits": could not a player who had "hit" a foul ball claim, in the absence of fidelity to the meaning of words, that he had gotten a "hit" and should be allowed to go to first base? And what of an outfielder who "runs" after a fly ball: could he not be looked upon as a "runner?" And couldn't all runs scored by the home team be properly referred to as "home runs," as distinct from the "visitor runs" of the other team?

If one extends this practice into other areas of human endeavor, one begins to understand how our social practices are so confused and contradictory. When the Strategic Air Command can tell us that "peace is our profession," and police departments can declare "your safety is our concern;" when U.S. military leaders in Vietnam could announce that a village had to be "destroyed" in order that it might be "saved;" when newscasters can inform us that butcherous terrorists are blowing up airliners in order to advance "human rights" or promote philosophic "principles;" when some brutish hulk, who has just been arrested for beating another man to a pulp, is identified by the police and media as a "gentleman;" and when President Reagan can suggest that Nicaraguan weapons in Central America encourage war, while American weapons in the same region promote peace, you can be assured that no one is being terribly concerned about the responses of language "purists!"

The quality of life in any society is reflected in the quality of our perceptions of reality. In order to live well — whether alone or with others — we must have as clear an understanding of reality as it is possible for us to have. The problem, however, is that language is inherently imprecise, always an abstraction of — and therefore different from — the reality we want words to represent. Alfred Korzybski expressed the dilemma in these words: "the map is not the territory." Words will always have a certain fuzziness to them, particularly when their definitions abut the boundary lines of other words.

But if human society is dependent upon how well we can communicate our understanding to one another, and if our words are never quite sufficient to translate our perceptions, understandings, or intentions with the kind of detail we would like, is it not clear that we must insist upon as much precision in our words as possible? If you doubt this, ask yourself whether you would care to request a doctor to remove a wart from your face, if you suspected that he or she did not understand the difference between the words "wart" and "nose."

This sportscaster is in the business of communicating with other people. Language, in other words, is the principal tool of his trade. One would think that he, above most others, would want to insist upon the most skillful and competent usage of such a tool, and resist making snide comments about "purists" who, in their angry letters to the station at which he works, seem to have a higher expectation in his employment of language than does he. What would this man think of a surgeon who reluctantly washed his hands before entering the operating room, complaining that he was doing so only because there were "purists" in the profession who believed in antiseptics?

Most of us would doubtless be upset with this example of the surgeon because his failure to maintain precision in the skills of his profession would likely produce more immediately harmful consequences than would the imprecision most of us practice in our use of words. It is this lack of immediate feedback from imprecise word usage that accounts for the failure of expectations many people have with the inability of written constitutions to limit political

power. The U.S. Constitution is awash in such generalized language as "general welfare," "common defense," "necessary and proper," "justice," "domestic tranquility," "due process of law," and "unreasonable," that I have long wondered how anyone can truly believe it to restrict the state in any meaningful way. And when the consequences of such unhindered state power tend to be diffused over time — unlike the example of the surgeon whose actions will have an immediate impact — most of us stand in dumbfounded awe and wonder how the visions of Jefferson, Franklin, and Madison, could get corrupted into the modern practices of the masters of "leviathan."

Those who believe that insistence upon clear definitions and proper word usage amounts to nothing more than "word games" designed to amuse intellectual "purists," are invited to visit the "worker's paradise" of various communist nations, there to witness a world free of "exploitation" and "oppression;" a world dedicated to the "noble" and "humane" experiment in human "liberation." But before you buy your one-way ticket, you might pause to consider these words of Nikolai Lenin: "liberty is precious — so precious that it must be rationed."

As George Orwell informed us, those who seek power over others must inevitably master the process of corrupting words into contradictory meanings. If you are able to understand how and why this is accomplished, you may also be able to appreciate the concern of those who are fussy about the way language is used in any setting in which men and women seek to communicate meaning to one another. To paraphrase Orwell, sloppy language produces a sloppy mind, and sloppy minds have produced the world as it is today.

This article was originally written on August 6, 1983.

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