

A Commentary on George Lakoff's "Metaphors of Terror"

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The linguist Norman Fairclough (1992) argued that, in recent years, there has been a significant shift in the social functioning of language, a shift reflected in the salience of language in the major social changes which have been taking place over the last few decades. Many of these social changes do not just involve language, but are constituted to a significant extent by changes in language practices; and it is perhaps one indication of the growing importance of language in social and cultural change that attempts to engineer the direction of change increasingly include attempts to change language practices (p. 6). In short, language use and social change have become more intertwined and mutually constitutive in today's world. This phenomenon presents linguists with an opportunity and a challenge. The opportunity is to bring an analytic understanding of language use to the public. The challenge lies both in the fact that linguists are not accustomed to communicating their understanding of language in a non-academic manner and the fact that the public is not naturally accustomed to thinking analytically and critically about language use.

We can assume that the general public in the United States has a nascent awareness of the power of language in social events and change, at least at the level of individual words. The debate and discussion over gender-sensitive language was fairly wide-reaching, and the use of terms such as "chairperson"—rather than "chairman"—and "fire fighter"—rather than "fireman"—is now the norm. Demeaning words such as "crippled" are no longer widely used. In relation to current world events, President Bush's use of the word "crusade", when discussing a response to the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington, was quickly pointed out as a linguistic faux pas, because of the historical connotations of the word. Within two days, the White House said that Bush regretted using the word (Leavitt, 2001). Similarly, in "an example of the key role language plays in building a global coalition against terrorism" (Squatriglia, 2001), the Pentagon abandoned its initial name—Operation Infinite Justice—for the coming military action, because it was offensive to many Muslims.

On a slightly less obvious level, there has been criticism of some American media for their selective use of the word "terrorist"—it is generally used to refer to the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks, but some media outlets use different words when referring to those responsible for attacks in Israel or Israeli-occupied territory, for example. Similarly, in an article in *The St. Petersburg Times*, linguist George Lakoff pointed out and provided an explanation for the media's more frequent use of the term "terror attack," rather than "terrorist attack," in discussing the September 11 attacks (Scheiber, 2001).

At a much less obvious level of language use, Lakoff discussed the use of metaphor in our perceptions of the September 11 attacks and in the Bush administration's reactions to the attacks in an article entitled "Metaphors of Terror" (Lakoff, 2001). In examining the administration's reaction to the attacks, Lakoff noted the administration's shift from initially discussing September 11 in terms of crime metaphor to a reframing of the discussion in terms of war metaphor. Lakoff provided a valid and insightful analysis of what was, in fact, a critical

move by the administration. The use of the war metaphor has arguably allowed the administration to exercise power in ways that would not have been possible under the crime metaphor—ranging from National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice pressuring the major television news media to censor certain reports to the proposal to create overseas military tribunals for captured suspects. There are two problems, however, in the “Metaphors of Terror” article which essentially made it a missed opportunity to bring an analytic understanding of language use to the public.

First, some of Lakoff’s analysis of the attacks themselves is simply too academic and esoteric to resonate with most people. He discussed the planes flying into the World Trade Center towers as eliciting the metaphor or image of “a bullet going through someone’s head,” and the towers falling as eliciting the metaphor of a body falling. The towers are explained as “symbols of phallic power” and their falling as “loss of power.” The Pentagon, on the other hand, is presented as “a vaginal image . . . penetrated by the plane as missile.” Whether or not there is any validity to this analysis, it is likely that the majority of Americans would disagree that any such metaphors affected their perception of and reaction to the September 11 attacks. Rather, it is likely that the majority of Americans would find this analysis to be too academic and irrelevant to them.

Second, Lakoff’s ultimate goal in the article was to suggest ways to reframe the discussion away from the war metaphor. In proposing this reframing, he argued that the war metaphor did not really fit the situation, proposed that we examine all the causes of radical Islamic terrorism, and made the case for a nurturant morality. The war metaphor was made to fit the situation, however, in large part because the public allowed it to be made to fit. The American public was and remains both angry and afraid. Blind and brutal retaliation for September 11 appears to many to be a legitimate, useful, and just response. Harsh as it may seem, in the current climate, the public does not want to hear a message that primarily focuses on the deplorable living conditions which may breed Islamic extremism. They do not want to hear words of peace and understanding. They want to hear words of war. This is the reason that the Bush administration’s use of the war metaphor has been successful—because the public is comfortable with it, and perhaps even finds a sense of security in it.

American public opinion holds a great deal of power over the federal government today. In a clear example of this fact, gays and lesbians are still not allowed to openly serve in the U.S. military not because President Clinton failed to keep his promise to gay rights groups, but because gay rights groups failed to make the case to the American public that gays and lesbians should be allowed to openly serve in the U.S. military. In short, public opinion matters a great deal in the U.S. today. Herein lies the importance of the challenge to linguists of assisting the public to think analytically and critically about language use.

A linguist who disagrees with the Bush administration’s approach to fighting terrorism can say much in analyzing the administration’s use of language that will be of interest to the public. The administration’s manner of presenting world events to the American public is in fact simplistic, ignorant of historical and cultural context, and condescending. The administration’s rhetoric may help lead to short-sighted actions that could have serious repercussions for Americans, and the world, in the future. Exposing these aspects of the administration’s language

to public scrutiny is more likely to cause people to listen, perhaps change their opinion on certain aspects of the administration's policy, and then pressure the administration to change those aspects of its policy.

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