

# From the President: Watch the Language

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In the early 1960s, an article appeared in a well-known American news magazine that reported on a student riot on the Berkeley campus of the University of California, an event that came to be called part of the “free speech movement.”

The article praised the students for devotion to their important principles. It accepted the legitimacy of their vision and behavior. It blamed the uncaring perspective of the establishment and the brutality of police for instigating the riot. It applauded the high-mindedness of the students and those who led them.

Having read of the riot elsewhere, I had a very different view about who had provoked the incident, and of the intentions of each side. Surprisingly, a search of facts in the article revealed none to disagree with. However, the facts and statements that showed the university administration, the local government, and the police in a favorable light were in the middle of paragraphs at the end of the article. Words such as “demand” and “insist” were used to describe actions of people on the “establishment” side of the issue. “Request” and “point out” referred to actions of people on the favored side.

With a bit of rearranging, the article gave the opposite impression of who was on the right side. Leading with paragraphs from the end, placing sentences buried in mid-paragraph at the beginning of the paragraph, and switching around words with good or bad connotations changed the entire tenor of the message.

The English language is rich in connotation. When a person feels a strong emotion, his words usually reflect it, unless he makes a conscious effort to change them. In describing his own behavior, he generally chooses words that put himself in a favorable light, while using words that show an opponent in a less complimentary light.

An approving word, like “flexible,” carries a very different message than the word “spineless,” but both describe a person who bent in face of an issue. “Rigid” and “firm” both indicate someone who did not bend. Each word in the pair describes the same act, but conveys an entirely different impression.

Our word choices are often habitual and unconscious. Psychotherapy may help someone see how words describing himself or his situation may influence a decision in ways that he doesn’t recognize. For example, a person can’t really procrastinate in a good way. But the word “timing” allows delaying a decision in a way that optimizes long-term outcomes. Using more neutral words can make a person psychologically as well as economically

free to choose, to borrow a term from the economics classic *Free to Choose* by Milton and Rose Friedman.

In developing propaganda, conscious selection and repetition of language creates familiarity and believability, with the goal of directing people’s thinking, ethics, and behavior.

Often words such as “left” and “right” confuse the picture. For example, Sen. Barry Goldwater and Adolf Hitler have both been called “right wing.” Yet the fundamental differences in political systems concern how much power the government has to make decisions in people’s lives. On a graph that places government power on the y-axis and individual decision-making freedom on the x-axis, totalitarian systems cluster in the upper left corner, and conservatism and libertarianism near the lower right. Anarchy is also on the lower right, but tends to lead to problems that cause people to yearn for a dictator. Afghans allowed the Taliban to come to power in the early 1990s for just that reason. Freedom can apparently survive only on a foundation of just law. But the reach of the law must be limited, for even though its initial intentions and actions may be benevolent, a very powerful government tends to attract power-hungry, self-aggrandizing individuals to leadership positions.

Today, the U.S. government has gradually, but markedly, increased its power, enacting increasingly intrusive laws and regulations. It has gained acceptance in large part because of its use of words.

The approving term “liberal” has come to relate to the application of government force to give people “rights”—welfare rights, as opposed to the liberty rights listed in the Constitution. The same word “rights” may be used, but the former denotes something that must first be forcibly taken from someone to give to someone else to whom it does not belong. Welfare rights can be enforced only by violating liberty rights.

Medical care is a right only in the sense of welfare rights. As the welfare entitlement has expanded, voluntary giving to persons in genuine need has contracted. “Progressive” programs mean progressively increased state power and a regressive and repressive effect on the private sector through bureaucratic stultification and waste. The benefits of government largesse tend to be seen, while the lost opportunities of the taxpayers who bear the burden remain unseen. The insights of Frederic Bastiat in his essay “What Is Seen and What is Not Seen,” published around 1850, are just as valid today as they were 150 years ago.

There are numerous examples of the effect of words on politics. A very effective term used by the Left to brand its opponents is

“extremist.” When did you last hear or read the term “ultra-liberal” or “extreme left wing” in the mainstream media?

The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) of 1996 provides neither portability nor accountability. And its Privacy Rule destroys privacy by opening up private information to governmental and private entities to whom it does not belong, without patient knowledge or consent, while requiring medical personnel to jump through pointless hoops at the expense of attentive patient care.

The USA PATRIOT Act has nothing to do with patriotism. Although it makes some important changes that keep up with changes in technology, such as cellular telephones, its primary effect is to expedite spying on the average citizen. It strips away protections of our liberty, although liberty has been the foundation of our patriotism.

Then there’s the term “best practices” to describe committee edicts to direct patient care.

Observing how our opponents distort the meaning of words in promoting their cause should teach us the importance of the careful use of words in communicating our own message. It is also important to remember that people respond not only to words but to tone of voice, quickness and directness of replies, and changes in facial expression, bodily gestures, and position. If emotions become heated, urgency and seriousness can too easily turn to aggressiveness.

We may think that most physicians should easily accept the AAPS goals of freedom and responsibility for patients and physicians in the practice of private medicine. But although the AAPS perspective on problems and its proposed solutions are sound, they may seem foreign or irrelevant to many doctors who have gradually acquiesced to third-party control and who read only “mainstream” materials. AAPS ideas may even seem threatening to physicians accustomed to the left-wing connotations now attached to words. We must not allow truth to become obscured by poor communication.

To present our perspective effectively, we must first listen well. Let others express their own viewpoints and vent their energy. Show respect for their views and be sure to indicate points of agreement. Stay calm and interested in the other person. Observe body language, which can be very revealing. One AAPS member who has talked to a number of physician groups said that the main thing he noticed is physicians’ fear. When you are aware of others’ concerns, it is easier to respond appropriately.

The opponents of freedom seem to be winning the war of the words. The future of freedom in medicine depends on our taking back the language.

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