Semantic Antics

Lexical Multi-valence

Communication is effectively a mode of expression (a way of conveying thoughts, sentiments, impressions) and/or a way of exchanging raw data (articulating concepts, descriptions, insights, or any kind of useful information about the world). With language, one can convey emotions or one can convey ideas. For this to work, though, one must be able to convey meaning in a way that that mimics a mental state between everyone involved. This requires a shared lexicon. And for a lexicon to be viable, there must be a mutually agreed-upon definition for each term.

Being scrupulous with our terminology ensures that language works well. That way, we can avoid nonsensical pseudo-concepts like “fetal personhood” or “unborn child”: the Orwellian vernacular often employed by so-called “pro-life” ideologues. Such linguistic prestidigitation is no blunder; it is by design; which is simply to say

that it is INTENDED to be misleading. The same people who ramble on about the well-being of embryos reject universal public healthcare; and refuse to support public policy that might give a leg up to those who are destitute. In sum: Those who fashion themselves “pro-life” are—in effect—pro-zygote, anti-human. (Part of the trick is to conflate two distinct—though generally correlated—concepts: humans and homo sapiens.)

This daffy Newspeak is enough to make even the impresarios of INGSOC blush. Alas, right-wing lingo is notorious for semantic antics. Legalized graft is rationalized by equating “money” with “speech”; then according legal constructs (corporations) legal personhood. That way, the protection of corporate interests can be passed off as the protection of human interests. As a result, even the most flagrant corporatism is rationalized simply by equating unfettered financial power with the promotion of civil rights.

Meanwhile, a plutocrat who bribes a politician is merely him exercising his right to “free expression”. Legislation being bought and sold to the highest bidder can thereby be characterized as the 1st Amendment in action. Here, “money” is “speech”. Such rhetorical feints are a reminder that, when using buzz-terms, we need to be wary of the more insidious instances of semantic antics.

Conflation is not the only problem. Consider the faux dichotomy of “cult” and “religion” (alt. “cultic” vs. “religious” activity / thinking). The former is dubbed the latter when it is seen as esoteric; or is otherwise not accepted within mainstream culture. The latter is what we end up dubbing the former when it has come to enjoy widespread acceptance in society-at-large. At the end of the day, these two terms describe a singular underlying phenomenon—as with, say, “leopards”, “pumas”, “jaguars”, “cougars”, “catamounts”, and “mountain lions”. Each of these large felines has a different stigma, depending on the culture; but they are all essentially variations of the same thing: **panthers** (not to be confused with the genus, “panthera”, which includes NON-panthers—like lions, tigers, and snow leopards).

Consider the daffy ways in which right-wing ideologues use the term “socialism”. They inveigh against things like public funding for vital social services (e.g. education and healthcare), investment in basic public infrastructure (e.g. mass transit and the power grid), or oversight of corporate activity (to curtail negative externalities; and to prevent the more powerful from exploiting the less powerful) even as they vociferously support CORPORATE socialism. In other words, they are against socialism for the masses (be it libraries, post offices, or fire departments),

yet are earnestly for socialism for the wealthy. The trick is to call the former (that which facilitates the commonweal) “socialism”…while assigning a noble-sounding label to unbridled corporate power.

Such Neoliberal Newspeak includes other misleading catch-phrases with which our public discourse has become festooned. Note, for example, the use of the buzz-term, “tax cuts” so often used in right-wing rhetoric. This simply means tax cuts for the ultra-rich (and massive tax breaks for large corporations); all the while maintaining onerous taxes on the working class.

Another indication of the deterioration of language is the commonplace usage of “literally” for emphasis (as opposed to its actual meaning, which specifies that a statement isn’t meant to be taken METAPHORICALLY). Never mind other vernacular twists like “ask” as a noun (for request) or “woke” as an adjective (for enlightened); the mis-use of “literally” stems from not even understanding what a basic word MEANS. Yet new lingo emerges; as human all have a predilection for slang: receipts (for evidence) and absolutely (for certainly / indubitably).

We can better diagnose societal dysfunction when we meticulously define each term we employ to articulate our ideas—taking great care to do so with perspicacity and precision. Take, for instance, two phenomena that are often not associated with each other in the public discourse: religion and political correctness. The former is institutionalized dogmatism; the latter is weaponized etiquette. While they are two different phenomena, they have salient parallels: Both are tribalistic, puritanical, and authoritarian—and thus: right-wing phenomena. Both involve groupthink. Both offer an ersatz morality—whereby proponents pass propriety off as probity; thereby honoring a strict regime of piety (as morality) vs. heresy (as immorality). And both encourage draconian blasphemy laws—policing expression and conduct. Recognizing the underlying commonalities enables us to better understand both phenomena; yet our language games often get in the way. We confuse our own colloquialisms for a kind of formal taxonomy; so end up missing salient points.

In such an environment, propaganda enjoys unfettered sway—enabling demagogues and charlatans to thrive.

And so it goes: Sloppy onomastics leads to un-necessary confusion. There is no better example of this than the loaded term, “Marxism”. What is often characterized as “Marx-ist” is, in reality, anti-Marxian. Karl Marx would certainly not HIMSELF have been what came to be called “Marxist”. Political “Marxism” generally ended up

being anti-Marxian in virtually every way—favoring, as they did, highly-concentrated power and top-down control (while routinely committing crimes against humanity). Instead of everyone having sovereignty over their own lives (complete emancipation), everyone was strictly controlled by an authoritarian tyranny (complete subjugation). Marx called for empowering workers to dictate the terms of their employment; Soviet-style "Marxism"—from Stalin to Mao—did the exact opposite.

Alas, when we are unscrupulous with our wording, legerdemain runs amok; and sophistry reigns supreme. Now it is tempting—for those who don't know any better—to blithely dismiss Marx's message because despots like Stalin and Mao branded their fascistic regimes "Marxist". (The same went for Kim Il Sung's "Juche", which was awkwardly branded as "Marxist-Leninist" in a gambit to ingratiate the regime with Moscow.) The buzz-term, "communism" ended up becoming a duplicitous branding strategy. One the one hand, it was used by fascistic regimes to operate under the pretext of populist ideals—thereby appealing to the rank and file under false pretenses. On the other hand, it was used by capitalist societies as a way to scare people away from ACTUAL socialism ("You want to heed Marx? Well, then look what happens!") In the end, sloppy language sabotages our public discourse.

A final example of how an unscrupulously instantiated semantic convention can be tremendously misleading is the conflation of the terms, "globalist" (pro-corporate) and "internationalist" (pro-human). The former is a matter of supporting the interests of trans-national corporations; the latter is a matter of fostering global human solidarity—specifically: trans-national solidarity amongst the working class. The trick is to exploit a commonality: Corporate power transcends national boarders; but so does human solidarity. The "catch", though, is that these two things involve diametrically-opposed ideals. "Globalism" is effectively economic imperialism (anti-Marxian); while "internationalism" is effectively cosmopolitanism (Marxian). The distinction, then, is between "Corporations of the world, consolidate!" (for the socio-economic elite) and "Workers of the world, unite!" (for the rank and file).

Passing internationalism off as globalism entails supporting plutocrats on the one hand, and the working class on the other. This amounts to the difference between corporatism and humanism—two things that could not possibly be more different. (Think of the difference between the World Economic Forum and Amnesty International.) Unfortunately, Neoliberal Newspeak conflates these two things… even as they are antithetical to one another. Consequently, "globalism" and "internationalism" are sometimes used interchangeably in public discourse; and

RIGHT-WING “populism” (that is: faux populism; i.e. fascism; which serves the interests of the well-positioned few) is confused for genuine populism (sincerely concerned with empowering the rank and file).

All this linguistic prestidigitation is a stark reminder that, if we really want to understand our world, we need to be meticulous with our terminology. When we are insufficiently fastidious with how we used language, semiotics can be easily hijacked; and people’s understanding of how the world works is promptly defenestrated.

Taking language seriously prevents perfidious actors from engaging in semantic antics. This means being precise–nay, perspicacious–with what any given lexeme MEANS; and ensuring everyone is–as it were–on the EXACT same page when it comes to (formal) definitions.

To “essentialize” (that is: to articulate the essence of something) is an integral part of any worthwhile conversation—be it formal scientific inquiry or a simple act of clarification regarding quotidian matters. The point of having definitions, after all, is to distill something to its essence—thereby answering the question: When we are OSTENSIBLY talking about X, what are we REALLY talking about? “Essentializing” is done in order to ensure that, when engaged in a conversation about X, everyone is concerned with the same kind of thing. A perspicacious approach to dialogue precludes scenarios in which interlocutors find themselves just talking past one another—an exigency that renders any discussion pointless.

Such a crucial didactic measure used to be considered a good thing. For that is how we are able to talk about concrete things (classes) like dogs and tables and genomes; and also talk about abstractions like “leadership” and “happiness” and “success”. Want to talk about “god”? Great. First, we must define what we mean by the term…just as we would if we were to talk about cats or chairs or DNA.

Alas. In some academic circles, “essentializing” is now considered a bad thing. Why? It is associated with stereotyping / stigmatizing; or it is seen as over-simplifying a complex matter; or, worse, it is equated with making gross generalizations. But definitions are neither stereotypes nor stigmas; nor are they over-simplifications or gross generalizations. They are the means by which we can ensure that everyone is on the same page—specifically: when it comes to MEANING.

Getting to the bottom of things (a.k.a. figuring things out) entails getting to the essence of things. And it is a fool's errand for us to (even attempt to) talk about X if we do not all mean the same thing when we refer to X.

Definitions must be established for communication—and any investigation—to be effective. Otherwise, we're just quibbling over definitions—that is: over what this or that term SHOULD mean; or means to ME, even if it might mean something else to you.

This matter is made a bit more complicated by terms that can have multiple definitions. Such multi-valence isn't necessarily a problem. For—typically—in any given instance, the meaning of such a term can be surmised from the context in which it is used. If I drive you to the store, it's different from driving you crazy. One involves physically conveying someone to a certain geographical location; the other involves causing someone to experience a certain psychical state. This distinction is clear to anyone who understand how the term operates in different ways.

At the time of this writing, the Oxford English Dictionary offers these tabulations regarding the number of (possible) definitions for the following words:

- "set" has 464 (at last count)
- "run" has 396 (though Simon Winchester has recently counted up to 645 distinct meanings)
- "go" has 368
- "take" has 343
- "stand" has 334
- "get" has 289
- "turn" has 288
- "put" has 268
- "fall" has 264
- "strike" has 250…and counting.

How is it that we do not have an aneurism each time we read a text that uses any of the above words? Most English-speaking children have mastered virtually all of the above words by the time they have reached adolescence (though not necessarily every definition). There has never been a dilemma translating any of these words into alternate languages—REGARDLESS of how they are used.

What does such lexical multi-valence mean for translation? Imagine a translator encountering the sentence:

Buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo buffalo.

The statement means: X that are bullied by other X, in turn bully X that are bullied by other X (where X is bison from up-state New York). {1} Imagine someone who was not well-versed in English tasked with interpreting this sequence (i.e. the same lexeme repeated eleven times).

A variation on this involves canines addled by other canines further addling each other: **“Dogs dogs dog dog dogs dogs dog.”** Make it about dauntless canines in the past tense, and one can refer to when dogged dogs dogged dogged dogs.

How about when a badger badgers badgers while a horse horse horses around? {2} For the same word being used several times in a row, there are myriad examples. Lexical ambiguity is compounded when one uses neither punctuation nor emphasis, inflection, and pauses where it is crucial to conveying meaning–as with: **“Bob, while John who had had ‘had’, had had ‘had had’; ‘had had’ had had a better effect.”** (Here also, the same phoneme occurs eleven times consecutively.)

Language does funny things, but any competent translator can surmise what the author was most likely “getting at” (and just as helpful: where he was “coming from”). This task can be accomplished in the same manner he might figure ANYTHING out: by employing deductive reasoning. With interpretation, this is usually done by considering what was said in the rest of the exposition (a.k.a. “intertextuality”).

As Shakespeare demonstrated, no language is more idiomatically versatile than English. The good news is that a competently-procured annotation is capable of explicating what something means.

A master of exploiting the idiosyncrasies of the English language was the stand-up comedian, Steven Wright. (Such idiosyncrasies were exploited for years of hilarious material.) Let’s look at some of the more fascinating semantic quirks.

Lexical Modularity

Funny things happen over generations when people are hearing and relaying lines verbally. Such are the pitfalls of oral transmission; which is why the game of “telephone” can be so amusing.

Phonetics can be cause for confusion. There is a difference between listening to the violins and listening to the violence; between being a trader and being a traitor. There is a big difference between responding to a query, “It was discussed” and “It was disgust.”

Semantics can be confusing in other ways, as with: “When one chooses the left one, it will be the right one; but then only the right one will be left.” Such sentences would surely confound someone who was new to English; though the meaning is actually quite straight-forward.

Syntactic ambiguity can usually be resolved by bracketing appropriate clauses–as with “They are hunting dogs” (are the dogs the hunters or the hunted?) and “I shot a hippopotamus in my pajamas” (was or wasn’t the large animal located in my clothing?) If I exhort you to “live for now”, do I mean “live in the moment” or “remain alive for the time being”? There are myriad statements with duel meanings–such as the classic: “I had him for dinner”.

There are simple declarations that can be a negation of THEMSELVES–depending on how syntax is treated. For example, “It can’t be too cold to snow” can be interpreted in opposite ways:

- It is possible for it to be too cold for snow to occur. (In order for it to snow, it must be sufficiently warm. Thus: It CAN be too cold to snow.)
- It is impossible for it to be too cold for snow to occur. (There can be no temperature too low for it to snow.)

The former is technically correct; and–felicitously–is the way the utterance would usually be interpreted. However, taken literally, it would have to be interpreted the latter (fallacious) way.

Language behaves in highly idiosyncratic ways. Take, for instance, when a phrase can be its own opposite. Idiomatic expression often follows its own logic…which is why, when we say an alarm is “going off”, it is actually going ON. When we fill OUT a form, we fill it IN. We recite at a play and play at a recital. We park on a driveway and drive on a parkway. We put a shipment in a car and cargo on a ship. Cyclists ride bikes while bikers ride motorcycles. “After dark” really means “DURING dark”. (After dark, it’s LIGHT.) {6}

Different locutions can often seem to contradict one another when used together—as with, “Hurry up and come down” or “Go ahead and back up.” A house burns up as it burns down. Meanwhile, when we say “girlfriend”, we mean a girl who is NOT just a friend. (The French term for a female romantic partner makes even less sense: petite amie, which means “little friend”.)

If I write an essay “on widening inequality”, the title could be either descriptive or prescriptive (depending on whether “widening” is an adjective or a verb). This is an important difference, as the essay could either be a lament or a proposal.

One rides IN a car but ON a bus, train, or ship. Turning something in and turning something over (giving it back) mean the same thing (pertaining to custody); and neither has anything to do with “turning” anything…as is the case with turning something on / off (pertaining to activation). Having X on one’s mind vs. having one’s mind on X are the same thing. When one “rents” something, it could be a matter of renting TO or renting FROM. And we refer to childbirth as “delivery” when it is much more like take-out.

Oddly, “prostrate” and “prone” are antonyms when referring to PHYSICAL orientation, but synonyms when referring to MENTAL orientation. A near miss is actually a near hit. A “hit” can be popular song or an assassination. While crime-fighters fight AGAINST crime and fire-fighters fight AGAINST fire, freedom-fighters fight FOR freedom. And there’s nothing civil about civil war.

Thus the exact same statement can mean opposite things. “I’ve been missing work” can mean that I pine for work (as I wish I could be there) OR that I have not been showing up to work (as I have decided not to go). Thus the same expression can mean EITHER an avid interest OR a complete lack thereof.

Some WORDS can even be antonyms of themselves–as with “obtuse”: wide (as with an angle of greater than 90 degrees) or narrow (as in: myopic thinking or optical myopia). Thus both “obtuse” and “myopic” can mean narrow-minded, even as the former is the opposite of acute. The prefix “con-” can mean either against or with / together. To illustrate the confusion that may arise, consider that “condescend” used to connote a sign of respect for those of lower socio-economic status; now it means to talk down to. (Instead of “con-descend”, we should probably say “contra-descend”.) Of course, the dual meaning of “con-” (with and against) entails that congress is not the opposite of progress.

Language often works in comically idiosyncratic ways; but this needn't confound us. In Spanish, "mina" means "mine"—which may refer to a landmine or a gold mine. (In other words: the term may mean something dangerous or something serendipitous. Opposites.) So declaring something to be "mina" can mean that it is something that one SHOULDN'T do or something that one SHOULD do. (It holds peril; it holds promise.) Yet this dual meaning poses no confusion when the term is used in metaphorically.

In English, "dust" can mean to put dust ON or take it OFF. A dozen more examples of auto-antonymy in English:

- **"cleave"** and **"hew"** (split; join / adhere)
- **"admonish"** (rebuke; entreat)
- **"discriminate"** (to discern based on perspicuity, so to be judicious; to discern based on prejudice, so to be injudicious)
- **"unqualified"** (inadequate; complete, as in an "unqualified success") {3}
- **"betray"** (thwart, as in trust; reveal, as in feelings)
- **"bolt"** (rapidly depart; hold in place)
- **"table"** (introduce into discussion; remove from discussion)
- **"nonplussed"** (unperturbed; perplexed)
- **"screen"** (veil; show)
- **"refrain"** (desist; repeat)
- **"oversight"** (something that has been completely over-looked; something that has been completely looked over)
- **"sanction"** (censure; endorse)

Thus "screening" something can be either a matter of obfuscation or an exhibition; while "refraining" can entail an abstention or an encore. Construing "oversight" in a certain way makes the difference between over-LOOK and over-SEE. And since "sanction" can mean to either restrict or approve, mis-interpretation can easily occur.

There are other examples. "Adumbrate" can mean to disclose or to obscure—to offer highlights or to overshadow. "Apprehension" can refer to comprehension (the fruit of cognition) or to anxiety (which ends up inhibiting cognition). The status "full capacity" can mean that nothing is left or that everything is left.

Prefixes are also inconsistent. “Inestimable” and “estimable” basically mean the same thing. So do invaluable and valuable, as well as ingenious and genius. (!) Again: “congress” is not the opposite of “progress”, even as “con” is the opposite of “pro”.

In other cases, there are dual meanings embedding in manners-of-speaking, which can pose problems for translators. If one “trims” something, one may be either adding TO or removing FROM it (as with “kutoa” in Swahili). In Hindi, “kal” can mean either today or tomorrow. In Spanish, “pourque” / “pour que” can mean either “why” or “because”. Such hermeneutic ambidexterity might be confusing at first blush; but it poses no problems for translation.

Meanwhile, antonyms can sometimes be used to mean the same thing, as in “prostrate” (face-down) and “supine” (face-up), both of which can indicate vulnerability / submissiveness. A term can even be the converse of itself, as with “cull”: extract the most desirable vs. kill off the least desirable. Thus “culling” can mean select in order to keep or select in order to reject.

Over time, the meaning of lexemes can transmogrify into their own antitheses. For example, “nice” used to mean silly; and “silly” used to mean blessed. “Base” used to mean morally degenerate; but now “based” is slang for laudable. Terms that mean one thing in one epoch can mean virtually the opposite in another epoch–as has been the case with:

- **“awful”:** from awe-inspiring to repugnant
- **“terrific”:** from terrifying to wonderful
- **“tremendous”:** from tremor-inducing to monumental
- **“outstanding”:** from anomalous to extraordinary
- **“pompous”:** from majestic to arrogant
- **“artificial”:** from well-crafted to phony
- **“incredible”** / **“unbelievable”**: from something of dubious verity to something awe-inspiring
- **“egregious”:** from distinguished / eminent to conspicuously bad
- **“passion”:** from suffering to ecstasy [the etymology of “com-passion” is suffering with]
- **“normalize”:** from making the deviant conform to the ordinary to accepting the deviant as the new ordinary

Bizarrely, “doom” [alt. “dome”] was the Old English term for an estimable law or judgment. The term “revisionist history” used to mean re-writing history (via fabrication). It is now sometimes used to mean correcting what had been depicted erroneously (by setting the record straight). That is: It used to mean concocting faux history (by creating misconceptions); and it now often means elucidating what really happened (by eliminating misconceptions).

Misnomers abound in our folklore because misnomers are commonplace in demotic language. The Trojan horse wasn’t Trojan (it was a Spartan gift GIVEN TO the Trojans). When we hear that an “allusion to elusion is no illusion”, this may be confusing to some ears due to the tripartite homophony. Indeed, the allusion was not an illusion. (One actually referred to the evasion, which was itself no misperception. One REALLY DID avoid things.)

Wonder how the meaning of words changes over time? Consider that gay men aren’t always gay; and there’s not necessarily anything queer about being queer. One does not need to be an expert in diachronic linguistics to recognize that “semantic drift” sometimes occurs. The loaded term “holocaust” originally meant “burnt offering” in Koine Greek (something that was considered a laudable act if it was done in tribute to the right deity). Now it means GENOCIDE. Thus it went from a very pious act to an atrocity. Go figure.

If one modifies “moving” with “fast”, it means higher speed; yet if one modifies “holding” with “fast”, it means remaining stationary. If one “rents” something, one could be renting TO or renting FROM. Asking “Who IS left?” is the opposite of asking “Who HAS left?” (Thus “left” can indicate a state of either remaining or departure.)

Other words have connotations that can go in one of two ways–as with “patronize” (to mock or to support). The term “glory” means something very different when it is used in the last line of the Nicene creed (as sanctified as it gets) than when it is used for “glory hole” (as salacious as it gets). When it comes to scribal activity, “take it down” means to WRITE a statement; when it comes to online activity, “take it down” means to ERASE a statement. Oversee is the opposite of overlook…even as to see and to look intimate the same thing.

In American slang, “sick” can mean amazing; “bad” can mean very good; and “wicked” can mean fantastic. Such dual meanings are not limited to colloquialisms. In the legal profession, to be DIS-barred is to be barred (from practicing law). One can make reservations without any reservations. And it is possible that staying at the last resort was not the last resort.

Some words are used as slang in idiosyncratic ways. “Bob is down” can mean that Bob is sad, Bob is interested, or that Bob is located at a lower elevation. Thus “down” is emotional, attitudinal, or positional. (One might even say that Bob is “down and out”.)

Dual meaning can also occur with phrases. “A great deal” can mean either a large amount or a bargain. “Take a cut” can mean either to take MORE money or take LESS money. Meanwhile, “backing down” often involves “backing up”. To “break WITH” and “break FROM” mean the same thing: to break away. Something that is “in” (fashionable) can be said to be “far out” or “out of sight”. Such is the nature of demotic language.

Often, new phrasing is used for pedantry. For instance, “lived experience” is used in academic circles to mean “experience”, as if there were any other way for one to experience things (i.e. while being alive). If one didn’t live through it, one did not really experience it. Meanwhile, to emphasize people’s socio-economic position in society with special consideration of their own perspective, “positionality” is used instead of, well, “perspective”. And “ask” used to be only a verb; now it is used as slang for the noun, “request”. (“It’s a big ask.”) Instead of “do me a favor”, many now say “do me a solid”.

The metamorphosis in fashionable lingo is sometimes degenerate. Placed before “up”, “woke” used to be the past tense for the verb “awake” (alternately rendered “awoke” or “[a]woken”). Now it is used by self-styled political “liberals” as slang for “enlightened” and “aware”. (Using the past tense of a verb as an ADJECTIVE harkens back to “lit” vis a vis “light”. The difference is that saying that someone or something is “lit” is grammatically correct.) In the argot of “woke” academics, we find “problematize”…which, it turns out, is the opposite of “problem solving”. It effectively means to CONCOCT some sort of “problem” that is in need of being addressed. “Interrogate” used to mean to question a person; now it is used as a synonym for “investigate” (when referring to a topic). This is absurd, as one poses

questions ABOUT a topic, not TO a topic. Hence we “problematize” an issue, then “interrogate” that issue; which simply means that we present a contrived dilemma, then wrestle with it…all the while pretending that we are somehow helping mankind.

In politically correct circles, “harm” (which used to mean damage that was empirically demonstrable) has come to mean “hurt feelings”. “Assault” and “violence” used to mean battery (i.e. a PHYSICAL attack); now it means anything that might cause any kind of discomfiture. (Thus: If I’m offended by something you say, I contend that you’ve done VIOLENCE toward me; that I’ve been ASSAULTED by you.) The argot of p.c. is palpably Orwellian.

When discussing people, “bodies” used to mean anatomies. Now some academics use the word to mean “people”—presumably emphasizing the physical aspect of human beings. So preventing physical violence against African Americans is described as protecting “black bodies” rather than protecting “black people”. Why? Because it sounds more sophisticated to those who are fans of such phrasing.

This peculiar semantic feint seems to reflect a recent phobia of the word “people”. In an effort to sound more down-to-earth, it has recently become fashionable to use the word “folks” instead of “people”. (This fad seems to have been put into overdrive with Barack Obama.) Had Abraham Lincoln employed this rubric, he would have extolled “government of the folks, by the folks, and for the folks”. Had the Founders employed it, the U.S. Constitution would have begun, “We the Folks…” Alas. Folksy is the new eloquent. So we hear that a lot of “folks” are in poverty, rather than that a lot of “people” are in poverty. Soon, we’ll be calling anyone who is affable a “folks-folk” rather than a “people person”. There’s no limit when it comes to daft lingo.

We can only hope that these inane stylistic quirks will soon run their course; and, when they mean “people”, people will start saying “people” again.

In academia, “studies” used to imply SCIENTIFIC studies—that is: scholarly activity that, in some way, made use of the scientific method. Now, it often just means sophistry in one specialization or another, often in the service of an ideology. By hijacking the term “critical” as was used by the Frankfurt School (in the original “critical theory”), which meant the same as when we say “critical thinking”, “woke” academics have come to coin new fields in the form “critical X studies” where X is some politically-charged, collective identity. In a realm where intellectual capture—be it from corporations or an aggrieved demographic—has become tragically

commonplace, such charlatanry often passes muster. After all, the point is to now signal “wokeness”, intellectual integrity be damned. And perspicacity is unheard of in an agora where euphemism reigns supreme.

Right-wing ideologues twist and contort language in ways that are not only Orwellian, but positively Kafka-esque. They advocate for zygote rights yet are consistently against human rights. They call this position “pro-life”. (Such ideologues are undeterred by the fact that, under no valid definition of “human” can fetuses in the first two trimesters qualify as such.) They refer to embryos as “unborn human beings” or “unborn children”—locutions that are nonsensical. The oxymoron, “fetal personhood” is yet another example of how people are capable of engaging in the nuttiest of semantic antics without even batting an eyelash. {13}

Fetal personhood is only the beginning. Right-wing ideologues also treat corporations as people. Thus: Pandering to corporate interests is seen as an invocation of civil liberties. To right-wing ideologues, this seems to make sense, as they see graft as an exercise of “free speech”. Meanwhile, “religious freedom” is a pretext for theocracy. And for those who are “hawkish” on foreign policy, supporting fascistic regimes—be it military juntas in Latin America, Judean Settlers in Palestine, or the House of Saud in Arabia—is often characterized as “supporting democracy”. Meanwhile, we are told about a “war on terror”, as if one could wage war on a TACTIC or SENTIMENT. No matter. It is simply a pretext for diverting public funds to an already-obscenely-bloated military-industrial complex. And, by the way, “terrorism” only applies when others do it, not when we do it.

The most infamous alteration in word-meaning is “Israel”: originally used to name a PEOPLE, yet pursuant to Revisionist Zionism, it was used to name a PLACE (as I discuss in my essay: “The Land Of Purple”); and it is NOW used as the name of a theocratic ethno-State.

A “troop” used to be an assemblage of persons (typically in a military context); now it is used as a synonym for soldier (as in “support the troops”). The hope is that such semantic sloppiness will cease sooner rather than later. In the meantime, let’s pray that “unborn child” will go the way of “unwed spouse”.

Idiomatic expressions are often context-dependent–which is why we shouldn’t say that we’re being “held up” at the bank when we were delayed due to long lines at the teller. Only those proficient in English might make sense of the seemingly

paradoxical, “He let me down by NOT letting me down” (“He disappointed me by keeping me elevating”). Given such locutions, it’s important to not always take a turn of phrase literally. (“Holy shit” doesn’t mean consecrated feces.)

Semantic elasticity becomes NON-straight-forward when idiomatic phrases use opposites while meaning roughly the same thing. In describing someone’s emotional state, to “light up” is to become excited whereas to “lighten up” is to become relaxed. “What the devil / hell…?” is the same turn of phrase as “What in god’s / heaven’s name…?”

Understanding idiomatic usage is what enables us to understand the statement: “When the rumors spread, her legs will follow suit.” When people go through a break-up, it’s often due to some kind of breakdown. Note the difference between causing relief wherever one goes and causing relief whenever one goes. A breakthrough is good; but if something falls through, it’s bad. There’s a difference between an outstanding performance (very good) and outstanding parking tickets (bad). Of course, the latter might be construed as tickets for phenomenal parking skills.

Idiomatic expression can sometimes pose (temporary) problems in translation if one is not careful. Semantic elasticity can be confounding for those not well-versed in a language’s signature idiosyncrasies. It’s is how “what’s up?” and “what’s going down?” can mean the same thing…which is the same as asking: “What’s going on?” or “What’s happening?” or “What’s popping?” or “What’s shaking?”

“Positive” test results aren’t always a positive thing. Nor is a positive feedback loop. “I’ve been missing work” could indicate that one does want to work or that one does NOT want to work. Similarly: “See who’s lying behind the curtain” can mean “Reveal the identity of the person who is clandestinely deceiving us” OR “Find out who’s in a supine position on the other side of the drapery.” The difference, then, is between “deception from” or “repose in” a secluded place.

Locutions are often far more peculiar than we realize at first blush. Another word used for emphasis is “wicked”, which—in New England—simply plays the same role as “very” or “really” when modifying an adjective. Meanwhile, in California, there’s “hella”—a shortening of “helluva”, itself a contraction for “hell of a”—which can also be used to modify adjectives. It is the equivalent of using “super” or “extremely”.

Naturally, dual meanings can cause some befuddlement. One can make an admission to no admission (divulging that one wasn't allowed inside) just as one can have no reservations about having reservations (confidence in one's arrangement to be a patron). Homonymy can also be confusing—as when asserting that the allusion to elusion is no illusion (that an oblique reference to avoiding something was really made).

Punctuation is crucial to meaning; yet it can only be conveyed verbally via inflection, emphasis, and pauses. The perennial bugbear is the pesky "comma". It is important to distinguish between a term being the object of a predicate or the subject being addressed—as with "Let's eat, Grandma" or "It's all over, my friend".

There is a difference between "I bought my wife a boat and a car" vs. "I bought my wife, a boat, and a car." This creates the same ambiguity as "I enjoy cooking my family and my dog" vs. "I enjoy cooking, my family, and my dog." So when making a list, the last comma (after the "and"; before the last item) is pivotal. The difference between "I was with the prostitutes, Sally and Cindy" and "I was with the prostitutes, Sally, and Cindy" is rather pivotal. In the former statement, I was with two people, Sally and Cindy—BOTH of whom were prostitutes. In the latter statement, I was with at least FOUR people, two of whom were Sally and Cindy—NEITHER of whom were prostitutes.

Once, in a letter to his sister-in-law, Angelica (who was in love with him), Alexander Hamilton began: "My Dearest, Angelica" rather than "My Dearest Angelica," … which, of course, intimated something very different than the anodyne address he intended. (The dual meaning of this opening was dramatized in the Broadway musical, "Hamilton".)

Periods are also important. There's a difference between "I quit drinking for the rest of my life" and "I quit. Drinking for the rest of my life." Just as dramatic is the difference between "I'm sorry; I love you" and "I'm sorry I love you." Such punctuation snafus can have grave repercussions. Imagine confusing "Don't! Stop!" with "Don't stop!" Also consider the request: "Let's eat, Grandma" as opposed to "Let's eat Grandma." Even a colon can make a pivotal difference. "The definition of opaque: isn't clear" vs. "The definition of opaque isn't clear".

Minor adjustments can make a crucial difference–as with inserting / omitting "be": "come apart" (to divide) vs. "become a part" (to join)…or, for that matter, "come to be a part". Meaning can transform by simply omitting an indefinite article: "There

are a few remaining" emphasizes what still exists; whereas "There are few remaining" emphasizes what no longer exists. "I address racism in my book" (discuss the topic of racism) vs. "I address the racism in my book" (admit being racist). This can happen even by misplacing an indefinite article: "I'm a just man" vs. "I'm just a man."

Even a hyphen can make a big difference–as with "I resent your gift" vs. "I re-sent your gift". Crucial differences can also result from the commission or omission of a SPACE. Behold: "It will not be long" (it is immanent) vs. "It will not belong" (it will be incongruous). Thus: Asked if you might be expected at the social gathering starting presently, the response "I won't be long" [Yes, I'll be there soon] intimates the opposite of "I won't belong" [I'm reticent to come, as I feel I won't fit in].

SPACES are crucial in certain places. Take, for instance, "meantime" vs. "mean time". The former means "interim". The latter can mean either of two things: the average duration OR a cruel / arduous period. Unlike with Khmer, Siamese, and Burmese, spaces matter. Consider the last two spaces in the statement, "We're all in this to get her." Take them out, and the meaning changes drastically. "Every day" (a prepositional phrase, as with "on each day") means that something occurs on all days, while "everyday" (an adjective) means that something is ordinary. The space makes the difference between constant and quotidian.

This issue has not existed with every language. Spaces didn't matter with ancient Greek script. Lexical separations are sometimes specified with other visual queues —as with, say, Arabic and Mongol scripts. And sometimes, spaces are optional—as with Aramaic script and some of its offshoots (Syriac, Sogdian, and Brahmi), Roman script, Old Khmer script, Old Mon (proto-Burmese) script, Sukothai (proto-Siamese) script, Sinhala script, as well as Dravidian scripts like Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam, and Kannada.

A single word makes a big difference, and can be lost in translation. This can be a matter of changing an indefinite article to a definite article (a vs. the). Hence the difference between saying "I'll do it a week before" vs. "I'll do it the week before." Definite vs. indefinite articles change meaning—a from (seven days prior) to (over the course of the preceding seven days).

The Russian language has no definite or indefinite articles; so the crucial distinction between "There are few problems" and "There are a few problems" might be lost in translation. By merely inserting the indefinite article ("a"), the emphasis goes from

there NOT being many problems to there BEING problems. Hence “don’t be too concerned with problems” becomes “there are some problems of which you should take note.” Also, observe what happens when one inserts the definite article (“the”) into “You are shit!” (derogatory)…rendering “You are the shit!” (laudatory).

The simple insertion of a preposition can do wonders. One can change “I want to have sex with you” to “I want to swindle you” by simply inserting “over” at the end, yielding “I want to fuck you [over].” Indeed: the insertion of a single word can completely transform a statement.

Simply insert “up” instead, and one can turn an invitation to copulate into an invitation to fight. Indeed: “I want to fuck you” and “I want to fuck you UP” makes the difference between wanting to engage in coitus and wanting to engage in battery. Simply inserting “up” changes making love to violent combat.

One can even insert “up” in different ways. To say someone is “fucked” is to say they are a lot of trouble; and probably doomed. To say someone “fucked UP” is to say someone made a mistake; whereas to say someone “IS fucked up” is to say that they are in some sort of disarray (inebriated, deranged, battered, etc.) Meanwhile, to say someone “fucked up” another person is to say they damaged them; whereas to say someone “fucked over” another person is to say they bamboozled them. So there is a difference between “you fucked up” (you mishandled something) and “you fucked me up” (you injured / discombobulated me). {4}

The difference between “I’m fucking you” and “I’m fucking [around] with you” is quite important, as “copulating with” and “joking with” are two rather different things. {5} The difference resulting from simply inserting “with” is something a less-than-astute translator might miss. After all, when one is fucking someone (sex), one is–indeed–doing something WITH them.

Meanwhile, reversing X and Y in “X on Y” does not change the meaning when X is “[someone’s] mind” and Y is a subject of thought. Alas, even native speakers sometimes forget the distinction between “thinking of X” (which intimates caring) and “thinking about X” (which specifies content).

Grammar is often inconsistent. We do something AT noontime, yet ON Saturday, and IN September; even as we schedule something FOR tomorrow. I can protect you and respect you; but while I do the former for your protection, I don’t do the latter for your respection.

The idiosyncrasies of conjugation are notorious in many of the world's languages. Some, like Polish, involve the conjugation of NOUNS as well as verbs. (!) English has its fair share of peculiarities. The past of teach is "taught"; but the past of preach isn't "praught".

Similar issues occur with pluralization. The plural of tooth is teeth; but the plural of booth isn't "beeth". (And while the plural of goose is "geese"; the plural of moose isn't "meese"). Moreover, there are some instances in which we don't append an "[e]s" at the end of a noun to pluralize it. Consider seafood like shrimp, calamari, and fish (rather than "seafoods like shrimps, calamaris, and fishes"). To make things more confusing, in American English, we say that "the homework is to consider all the evidence, then do the math"…whereas in British English, one can get away with saying that "the homeworks involve considering all the evidences, then doing the maths."

Across languages, a seemingly identical word can come to mean different things. Take, for instance, "frontier". In English, it connotes place of potential expansion (i.e. of possibility)…as with new horizons. Yet in French, it connotes a BOUNDARY (i.e. a limit)…as with "Médecins Sans Frontières" [Doctors Without Boundaries]. This is why M.S.M. is translated into English as "Doctors Without [national] Boarders" rather than "Doctors Without Frontiers". As it turns out, boundless doctors actually have ENDLESS frontiers.

Bracketing is also an issue. "I shot an elephant in my pajamas" is the classic example (mentioned earlier). This can actually mean any of THREE things. "When I shot it, I was wearing my pajamas." Or "When I shot it, the elephant was wearing my pajamas." Or "When I shot it, I was wearing the pajamas; and the elephant was (somehow) also inside my pajamas." Meanwhile, "mobile kitchen repair" can mean kitchen repair that is mobile, or the repair of mobile kitchens. Qualifiers are not always straight forward. Is a "criminal lawyer" and lawyer who PROSECUTES criminals or a lawyer who IS a criminal? Such idiosyncrasies can be easily addressed by astute translators.

The peculiarities of various languages are endless. But in all cases of poor translation, it is the translator that should be blamed, not the source language.

As we've seen, meanings–and stigmas–change over time. And semiotic switch-a-roos are not uncommon. Taxonomies often flip. In the mid-19th century, the Progressive caucus in America was known as the "Radical Republicans". Now,

“Republican” refers to an ultra-Reactionary party: the proto-fascist cult that is the G.O.P. The original party, the “Democratic Republicans” is almost an oxymoron now; but the etymology makes perfect sense. The United States Of America is, indeed, a Republic that aspires to be democratic. After all, there is nothing about a Republic that is inherently antithetical to liberal democracy. Alas, the socio-political (and economic) term “liberal” has undergone so many hermeneutic turns (and a flowering of disparate connotations) that it’s hard to keep track. It GENERALLY means that one is against authoritarian regimes–which could mean Soviet-style communism or fascism or any kind of oligarchic system (plutocracy, corporatism, etc.) But sometimes it is used to mean only one of those things…but not the others.

In 1843, Karl Marx wrote: “The glorious robes of liberalism have fallen away; and the most repulsive despotisms stands revealed for all the world to see.” He was referring to highly-concentrated economic power (and top-down control). John Stuart Mill was considered a “classical liberal”; but what does THAT (19th century term) even mean NOW (in the 21st century)? After all, even Mill considered himself a (Marxian) “socialist”–prescribing, as he did, the pursuit of “common ownership of the raw materials of the globe.” Abraham Lincoln was against bankers and other private tyrannies (read: corporate power). {7} Meanwhile, in 19th-century Germany, “liberals” were allied with nationalists / imperialists! And Benjamin Constant was a European “liberal” who is a forerunner of modern CONSERVATISM.

By the post-War era, “liberalism” seemed to correlate with the thinking of the intelligentsia–leading Lionel Trilling to assert (in 1950) that liberalism in America was “not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition.” Yet even this was deceptive. Once the Chicago School established the “Washington Consensus”, there emerged the patently RIGHT-wing “neoliberal” order. The “liberal” in “neoliberalism” means the espousing of free-market fundamentalism; which entails the tacit promotion of corporate power. All THAT translated to right-wing foreign policy–based primarily on serving trans-national corporate interests. The implication is dire: the projection of imperialist power…whilst fueling the military-industrial complex (read: private military contractors); all with complete disregard for human rights.

So what, then, does “liberal” mean? Of course, SOCIALLY liberal means anti-traditionalist (willing to buck convention and question authority). Yet “economically” liberal often entails an antipathy to social welfare. To be “liberal”, then, can intimate either a left-wing or right-wing political orientation.

Other lexical transformations are illustrative of hermeneutic flexibility. "Gay" used to mean gleeful, and now typically means homosexual. "Savage" used to mean primitive and unsophisticated, and now typically means barbaric. "Bachelor" used to mean a student of the lowest rank at a university, and now means an un-married man. What begins as mere catachresis can eventually became a transformation in the vernacular. The funniest example is "penis": from backside to frontside (originally Latin for tail, now the name for male genitalia).

In politics, nomenclature has been turned on its head in several instances:

- **"Federal-ism":** Originally a descriptor for centralized government; it has become a euphemism for "state's rights" (divestment of Federal power). It used to mean power concentrated at the federal level of the Federal government; now it means the opposite (deference to each state's prerogative). Alexander Hamilton was a Federalist; now he'd be an anti-Federalist.
- **"libertarian-ism":** Originally a descriptor for anarcho-syndicalism (stateless socialism); it has become a euphemism for anarcho-capitalism (free-market fundamentalism). At first, it referred to freedom from the control of hierarchal (top-down) institutions; and was thus a LEFT-wing ideology–in keeping with Stateless socialism (a.k.a. "libertarian socialism"), the epitome of which was anarchism (including anarcho-syndicalism). NOW it often refers to a RIGHT-wing ideology: free-market fundamentalism (i.e. anarcho-capitalism). {8}
- **"property rights":** In the original Lockian sense, the idea was to ensure that people could not be disenfranchised by a tyrannical government (via confiscation). It is now invoked as an excuse to put property rights over civil rights (thus prioritizing private financial power over civic-mindedness). The former was against arrogating highly-concentrated power at the expense of the commonweal; the latter is FOR doing so.

Some terms now have DUAL meanings–sometimes in a way that discombobulates the public discourse. Two examples:

- **"nationalism"** can mean a kind of tribalism. It can also mean an endeavor to effect self-determination. The former, being a conceit that involves some kind of Exceptionalism, is typically a right-wing phenomenon; as it has generally accompanied fascistic movements. The latter, as resistance to domination / exploitation / marginalization by (external) powers, is typically a left-wing phenomenon; and has generally accompanied movements promoting

democratic socialism. The difference, then, is a matter of either promoting or combating imperialism.

- **“populism”** can mean a gimmick to appeal to the masses by generating mass-hysteria / mass-mania. It can also mean taking into account the concerns of the everyman. The former, being some combination of pandering and exploitation, is typically a right-wing phenomenon. The latter, being a matter of genuinely caring about the commonweal (including the “little guy”), is typically a left-wing phenomenon. The difference, then, is between bolstering a mob mentality (for the benefit of a few well-positioned insiders) and looking out for the little guy. {9}

Semantic elasticity should not be confused with–or fashioned as–lexical fungibility. It is important to recognize that definitions (i.e. definitive meanings) EXIST; and that a respect for formal language entails acknowledging that certain things unequivocally mean what they mean.

To cultivate aptitude in a language is to understand such semantic quirks; and the ways in which those semantic quirks can be exploited by those adept in the art of casuistry. We see this with buzz-words like “reform”, “radical”, and “liberty”. Such things do not confound an astute translator. For no adept translation need be hamstrung by the idiosyncrasies of language. Honest translators recognize such things for what they are (and so take them into account when crafting the new articulation).

Language works in funny ways. Due to the idiosyncrasies of nomenclature, misnomers are ubiquitous. In French, a potato is called “apple of the earth”. We have plenty misnomers in the U.S. as well: Federal Express is not federal and the Secret Service is not secret. Military intelligence has to do with knowledge, not intelligence; as it pertains to information rather than cognitive acuity. Here are 50 more examples of misnomers in the English language:

- The theory of gravity is not just a theory. The same goes for the theory of evolution.
- Shooting stars aren’t stars.
- Starfish, jellyfish, and crawfish aren’t fish.
- Guinea pigs are neither pigs nor from Guinea.
- Koala bears aren’t bears.
- Mountain goats aren’t goats.
- Mountain lions aren’t lions (they’re panthers / cougars / pumas).

- Hedgehogs aren’t hogs.
- Horned toads aren’t toads.
- Mountain chickens aren’t chickens (they’re frogs).
- Fisher cats aren’t cats.
- Killer whales aren’t whales.
- Siamese cats aren’t Siamese (anymore).
- Nepalese terriers are neither Nepalese nor terriers.
- Tin-foil isn’t made of tin. (It’s aluminum foil.)
- Led pencils don’t actually use led.
- Dry ice isn’t ice.
- Dry cleaning isn’t dry.
- Double Dutch isn’t Dutch.
- The Pennsylvania Dutch aren’t Dutch (they’re German).
- Danish pastries aren’t Danish (they’re originally from Austria).
- Swiss cheese isn’t Swiss. (Emmental and Gruyere are Swiss.)
- Chilean sea bass isn’t Chilean.
- Italian salad dressing isn’t Italian.
- French toast isn’t French; nor are french horns, french crullers, or french fries. And French salad dressing is American.
- White chocolate isn’t chocolate.
- Pineapples aren’t apples, and have nothing to do with pine.
- Coconuts aren’t nuts; and certainly have nothing to do with coco. {14}
- Mince-meat isn’t meat.
- Coffee beans aren’t beans.
- Chili peppers have nothing to do with pepper.
- Grapefruit has nothing to do with grapes.
- American Indians aren’t Indian.
- Arabic numerals aren’t Arabic (they’re Indian).
- Chinese checkers isn’t Chinese. Neither are “Chinese” fortune cookies.
- Russian roulette isn’t Russian. Neither is Russian salad dressing.
- Panama hats aren’t from Panama.
- English horns are not English (they’re German).
- Scientology has nothing to do with science.
- Roman Catholicism isn’t (literally) catholic.
- Sport coats are not for sports. Neither are sports cars.
- Redheads have orange hair.
- Black eyes are red and purple.

And, of course, the Holy Roman Empire was neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire. Boxing rings are rarely circular. Hamburgers have nothing to do with ham; eggplant has nothing to do with eggs; and sour dough isn't sour…any more than pommes de terre are apples. And while vegetarians eat vegetables, humanitarians don't eat humans.

Such faulty nomenclature is usually innocuous; but sometimes Orwellian taxonomy is employed for propagandistic purposes—as when overtly fascistic regimes like those under Stalin, Mao, and Kim Il Sung are characterized as "Marxist" or "communist". Duplicitous branding schemes are commonplace when the coiner is seeking to deceive or manipulate the audience.

Resemblances can often account for misnomers—as with glue guns, mantis shrimp, jackrabbits, electric eels, seahorses, and sea cucumbers. Flying lemurs kinda resemble lemurs and kinda seem to fly.

Misnomers abound in culture. Herman Melville's masterpiece, "Moby-Dick" is about the pursuit of a great, white whale…which happened to be a sperm whale. In the narrative, the color "white" is extremely important (semiotically). Yet sperm whales are not actually white. (They're dark gray—sometimes with a brownish-purple sheen.) So much for the whiteness of Ahab's infamous quarry! {15}

As a result of the discrepancy between the Julian (Byzantine) and Gregorian (Latin) calendars, the Russian "October Revolution" was really in November, the "February Revolution" really in March.

For any given language, there is a beguiling plethora of euphemistic locutions, misnomers, and idiomatic expressions that can't be translated literally. The same goes for other quirks–as with a metonym, a zeugma, a syllepsis, or–as is often encountered in sacred scripture–hyper-anaphora (repetition of a word or phrase for rhetorical effect). However, such rhetorical devices (tropes, catch-phrases, figures of speech) can be always articulated in alternate languages–even if via annotation. This is especially the case for texts that claim to be timeless. (Surely, an omniscient author would be aware of locutions that might become dated; and thus misleading.)

We needn't be thrown into paroxysms of bewilderment each time we encounter lexemes that have myriad connotations. The quintessential example of this is the Sanskrit term, "ishvara". In its earliest (Vedic) usage, it was used for lord, king / queen, or even just one's soul ("atman"). In medieval (Hindu) usage, it could mean supreme being ("brahman"), personal god ("ishta-deva"), or simply the self.

Shaivists use the term synonymously with their patron deity, Shiv[a]. Vaishnavists use the term synonymously with their patron deity, Vishnu. Etc. (We also encounter semantic elasticity with the Sanskrit term, “purusha”.)

Lexical multi-valence might make translation less straight-forward, but it doesn’t doom us to some semiotic quagmire either. Annotation is always available; and perspicacious translators avail themselves of judicious annotation, as needed. Some of this must be done via anthropology / philology–as when discerning the probable meaning of antiquated colloquialisms. Some of this must be done via intertextuality (assuming hermeneutic consistency throughout the work). The conveyance of MEANING is all that matters in the final analysis.

A Lexical Cornucopia:

As Orwell reminded us in the dystopian future of his novel, “1984”, it is difficult to fully exercise free speech with an impoverished vernacular. Wittgenstein rightfully noted that the bounds of our language are the bounds of our world. Insofar as our lexical domain is constrained, so, then, are our horizons for speculation.

Such constraints also impose a handicap on our capacity to apprehend and express. The Koran furnishes votaries with a very limited vocabulary–the only compliment of linguistic tools, they are given to believe, that they shall ever need to grasp life, the universe, and everything. Insofar as one is behooved to articulate all things in just those terms, one's thinking can't help but be drastically circumscribed.

Take, for instance, the ubiquitous–nay, incessant–usage in Urdu of "Insh-allah" (from the Arabic for "god willing"). This is engendered by–and, in turn, engenders–a mentality, whereby one's control over one's own destiny ("qadar") is removed from the equation (to wit: one's say in the trajectory of one's own life). Consequently, Urdu does not have modals for hypotheticals like "could", "would", and "should". In Urdu, the only word to convey possibility is "shayad", which has more to do with what MIGHT happen (as in the sort of "maybe"), still resigning the course of things to god's will.

This is a reminder that, insofar as one's vocabulary is limited, critical inquiry is stunted.

The next time someone who fetishizes [insert language here] decides to rhapsodize about how many different ways one can articulate something in said language, ask him to compare the size of that language's thesaurus with the size of an English thesaurus. Then ask him to mosey on over, meander on over, roam on over, stroll on over, amble on over, sally on over, sidle on over, step on over, canter on over, waltz on over, wander on over, and–if there's still time–saunter on over. That's a dozen different ways to say, "walk casually" (oops, make that 13).

That's not to be confused with romp / rollick / rove / jog / dawdle / march / straggle / ramble / shamble / shuffle / scuffle / scuttle / scutter / scoot / stalk / stamp / stomp / tromp / tramp / traipse / trounce / [teeter-]totter / trudge / trot / trod / plod / hop / hobble / gad / galumph / gambol / glissade / frolic / flounder / flit.

Slightly modify some of these terms, and the meaning changes. Append "ch" to "scoot", and it means to move by shimmying. Append "-scotch" to "hop" and one is doing it in a pattern. Append "-se" to "tromp" and it has more oomph. Append "-le" to "tramp" and it insinuates that damage has been done. Take "-le" away from "scuffle", and it involves dragging one's feet. (That's forty MORE ways to say "perambulate" / "peregrinate" by the way. Oops; make that 42 more.)

Then there's lumbering and clambering. There's also sashaying, prancing, and flouncing for those who feel festive. We can wend our way over…and even stray. Move quickly, you say? Well, then run, race, lope, lunge, bound, bolt, hustle, dart, dash, spring, sprint, scurry, scamper, skit[ter], hop, hoof it, book it, and haul ass. Then there's flee, jet, skedaddle, scram, vamoose, split, shoo, steal away, get lost, take a hike, make tracks, take flight, hightail it, get a move-on, and make a break for it. (That's forty MORE.) But whatever you do, don't tarry / lag / lolly-gag / [ma]linger / loiter / [a]bide / alight / straggle / [dilly-]dally / [diddle-]dawdle.

This many ways to say "be on your way" and "move your butt" (using your legs) reflects the remarkable versatility of the English language. Its vast assortment of lexical capabilities is breathtaking to contemplate. If something so simple as "go over there on foot" can be expressed in so many different ways, one can imagine that the potential for articulating more profound things is virtually limitless.

And so it goes: We can go skylarking or galavanting, carousing or parading, prowling or lurking, jaunting or promenading. We might even weave our way over. If distraught, we might mope or skulk. If listless, we might putter or potter. If confused, we might stravage. If sneaky, we might slink. If proud, we strut. If awkward, we might waddle. If gleeful, we might skip. If flamboyant, we might flounce. If injured, we might limp. If restless, we might mill. If we're being quiet, me might tip-toe. If we have four legs, we might gallop. If we're in a meadow, we might graze. If we're lazy, we might slog. If we're tentative, we might malinger. If we're drunk, we might stagger…or stammer…or stumble. If we're panicked, we might scramble. If we're feeling festive, we might carouse. If playful, we might gallivant. Shall we also discuss the carriage one has during peregrination? Or the pace at which one paces? How about the stride of one's stride? The lexical possibilities are endless. **(That makes 130, by the way.)**

Can any other language do this? Aside from intoning the kind of gait one has during bipedal locomotion (zoinks, there's another one!), English offers a resplendent buffet of options for almost every concept imaginable.

One way to ascertain the nuances in a language is to survey the scope of quasi-synonyms. A concavity in the landscape, you say? You mean a valley? Or perhaps it was a vale…or a swale? Or a ditch, a dale, or a dell? Or even a gap, a gulch, a gully, a grove, a gorge, or a glen? Or maybe even a fen? Nope. Turns out it was a canyon…not to be confused with a ravine or a basin or a coulee or a notch…or a

chasm or a fissure…..or an arroyo, a canal, a channel, a culvert, a trench, and a ditch. For lexical versatility, it's not merely the size of the dictionary; it's the size of the thesaurus.

Want nuance? Is there a distinction to be made between quibbling and squabbling? Botching, bungling, and blundering? Shall we consider the difference between beguilement, bewilderment, befuddlement, and bafflement? Welcome to the stupendously vast English lexicon. No other language has such a vast assortment of options for articulating nuance.

What's the difference between crotchety, cranky, crabby, grumpy, and grouchy? What's the difference between peace, placidity, tranquility, and serenity? What's the difference between flicker, shimmer, glimmer, and glisten? What's the difference between putrescent, putrid, fetid, acrid, and rancid? What's the difference between cuddle and snuggle, hoist and foist, wipe and swipe, poke and prod, squish and squash, whirl and twirl, wack and smack? Is there a distinction to be made between smash, mash, mush, and smoosh? Blur and blend? Smudge and smear? Use and utilize? Is it a fracas or a ruckus? Is it pandemonium, bedlam, or mayhem? Is one being adventuresome or adventurous? Exploratory or explorative? There's whirl and swirl and twirl. There's grasp and grab and clutch and cling and clench.

Linguistically, there are different shades of the same color. What's the difference between a hullabaloo, an imbroglio, and a fiasco? (Is it just a predicament or is it more of a kerfuffle?) What's the difference between a catastrophe, a cataclysm, and a calamity? (Is it more like a disaster or a debacle?)

Having at one's disposal many terms for the same kind of thing has lots of hermeneutic–nay, literary–utility. But having many connotations for a single term can lead to confusion. Let's look at the lexical multi-valence of one final term.

PROSTITUTION?

The oldest avocation in history is universal across all cultures. But is it really describing just ONE THING? Or is this not so straight-forward?

Upon hearing “prostitute”, we might picture a buxom floozy—wetting her lips with a probing tongue as she coyly cinches up her skirt to offer passers-by a fleeting glance at her supple loins. Are we right in forming such a picture?

Or are we to picture, instead, a feisty, pig-tailed tart—winking at her beguiled target-customer as she licks her lollipop? Or is it a fellow at some prestigious “think-tank” willing to sell his policy positions to whatever corporation pays his salary?

This poses a quandary. Perhaps we should picture a sassy strumpet in pink thigh-highs carousing the city’s trendiest night-clubs–a desperate pleading in her eyes as she tentatively bites her bottom lip (and showcases her cleavage at opportune moments). But then again, perhaps we should picture a Senator willing to support legislation that favors the interests of his biggest donors.

So what is it to be a “prostitute”? Are there any defining features? There is, after all, a difference between, say, a giggling trollop at a Thai massage parlor commiserating with male tourists who are anxiously seeking quick gratification as

they fumble for their wallets…and, say, a cunning harlot canoodling with corporate executives in a luxurious penthouse suite, with a wry smile and a penchant for limitless credit cards.

Things that are superficially different turn out to be different manifestations of the same phenomenon. It's the social context–and the stigmas–that changes from case to case. Gold-diggers seek a single, long-term client; whereas hookers seek numerous short-term clients. A prostitute is someone who is interested in a partnership—sexual or otherwise—only in proportion to the money he/she will get out of it, be it a 20-minute trick or a 20-year betrothal. It might be paid in cash on the spot; or it might be an on-going arrangement with an array of economic emoluments.

The notion of "prostitute" seems rather simple at first blush (and well beyond the second blush); yet we soon find that the term can refer to many KINDS of things. Is it like a belching medieval tavern wench, bursting from her strained bustier as she beckons provocatively from a corner table, legs splayed wide as she chugs a pint of lager…before slathering her heaving bosoms with frothy drool?

- Or is it more like a preening debutant, gingerly fidgeting with her garter-belt as she bats her eyelashes…willing to please any suitor with deep pockets?
- Or is it more like a rambunctious, disheveled hooker, prowling the dark streets in the sketchy part of town during the witching hour?
- Or is it more like a high-end call-girl, sashaying through a ritzy casino in a fetching evening dress, seeking a high roller with libidinal cravings?
- Or is it more like a husky vamp in a seedy brothel signaling her desire to guzzle any patron's sperm…if, that is, the price is right?
- Or is it more like the ambitious starlet on the casting couch, eager to ingest copious amounts of semen to advance her acting career?
- Or is it more like a nubile gamine who furtively twirls her hair while popping her bubble-gum, eager to straddle the next eligible bachelor…but only if he is willing to take her shopping?
- Or is it more like a flirtatious bimbo parading her overly-oiled curves, as she struts down the boardwalk in a florescent orange bikini, awaiting a sugar-daddy to whisk her away on his yacht?
- Or is it more like a voluptuous femme fatale serving as the honey-pot for an unsuspecting "mark", who is apt to divulge proprietary information at the enticing prospect of impending copulation? (That would make them BOTH prostitutes.)

What is the one thing that all these characters have in common?

In other words: What is a prostitute? It is not necessarily a solicitous tramp yearning for the next deluge of igneous ejaculate to be strewn across her visage…in exchange for cash. On the other hand, it might be a well-coifed, ladder-climbing careerist willing to devour a superior's throbbing phallus in return for a lucrative promotion. (After all, a quid pro quo is a quid pro quo.) Both are fishing for potential gulls. Both are engaging in the lascivious craft of Machiavellian seduction: one bawdy, one polished.

Regardless of the context, we find a woman selling access to her body…and a man selling access to other things of value. Thus the amount of glamour involved is entirely beside the point.

So what, then, is the difference between a disheveled, termagant skank beaconing to passers-by in the parking lot behind a suburban food-mart…and, say, a dapper gigolo soliciting high-end clientele at a swank country club? At what point does someone qualify as a prostitute?

Once we discount the level of glitz, it becomes difficult to articulate exactly what we might be referring to. Indeed, prostitution can be tawdry or refined, devious or wistful. It can come in the form of a libertine beldam prepared for unbridled sex with any bystander at the drop of a hat. Or it might be a coquettish sorority girl seeking a higher grade from a libidinous professor after office hours (one exchange, two prostitutes).

As it turns out, even a term as simple as "prostitution" is not a simple thing at all. It could refer to one who is willing to sell one's mind OR one's body. Either way, it is one who can be "bought". To wit: It refers to somebody who is prepared to sacrifice one's principles on the alter of avarice.

Indeed, prostituting oneself can involve things other than sex. One does not have to be a conniving vixen offering a quick shag for lucre; it can be a politician selling legislation to the highest bidder…or an academic willing to mold his "findings" according to the ideology of his paymasters. There is something just as reprobate about the graft of a conniving oligarch perched in his luxury penthouse as there is about a hooker dolling out hand-jobs in a dingy public restroom. The fact that the former comes off as prim whilst the other comes off as lewd is a byproduct of social norms. But if we dig down, we discover that prostitution is not a function of decorum.

With respect to sex, this simple label MIGHT refer to a sultry dominatrix donning a leather corset and chain-link thong, snapping a cat-o-nine tails in her dimly-lit, underground layer. However, it might INSTEAD refer to the gadabout gold-digger hobnobbing with plutocrats on a posh rooftop terrace…parading her god-given endowments in haut-couture, while demurely sipping a martini. One is licentious, the other just tacky.

In EITHER case, it is:

Someone who exchanges sexual favors for financial gain.

The key difference, then, is that the gold-digger seeks one customer at a time while the "professional" prostitute is apt to move from one customer to the next. {10}

The fact that someone settles on a single customer (indefinitely) does not disqualify it from being prostitution; it simply changes the terms of exchange. Monogamy and prostitution are not mutually exclusive. Choosing a unique partner for financial benefit is–effectively–signing up for (voluntary) concubinage. One no more has to operate in a brothel to be a prostitute than one has to operate in a cathedral to be a preacher.

Rarely, though, does the galavanting socialite–seeking to fill her coffers–admit to being a prostitute; even as she hobnobs with the movers and shakers of high society, purchasing status using the world's oldest currency. In fact, her pretense makes her station all the more mendacious. She believes that being less forthcoming about her scheme somehow makes her modus operandi less tawdry. It doesn't. (At least the OVERT prostitute is more honest about what she is doing.)

Even as "prostitution" ranges from the prurient to the pragmatic, a person who is for sale (in some shape, manner, or form) is a prostitute; irrespective of the context. A promiscuous Playboy bunny earning her keep by satiating the carnal hankerings of her high-rolling audience isn't fooling anyone. {10} In the final analysis, a hussy is a hussy.

Few people fuss over the wide variety of people this simple word accurately describes. After all is said and done, there is indubitably a profound difference between the slutty jezebel cavorting with townies at the local saloon and the fabled whore of Babylon. Indeed, we can be quite certain that the derisive idiom found in the Book of Revelation is not referring to the inebriated vixen at the end of the bar offering to perform fellatio for a free drink. {11}

The disproportionate reference to females prostituting themselves in the sexual sense (gigolos were only mentioned once) is not due to the fact that females are somehow more depraved than men. Rather, the massive disparity can be attributed to two things:

- Men are far more manipulatable by (the prospect of) sex. Barring scenarios involving gay men, women are better positioned to take advantage of this weakness. (There's a reason lesbian prostitution has never existed.)
- Due to the prevalence of patriarchal societies, men tend to have much more sense of entitlement (including sex with women of their choice). This undergirds the objectification of women (as well as the commodification of sex); which invariably leads to the exploitation of women (spec. for the sexual gratification of men).

There is a simple litmus test for prostitution: Is the person for sale? Prostitution is not a simple quid pro quo (a basic condition of human interaction); it involves "selling out" (that is: abandoning one's principles in order to materially benefit). {12} Many politicians, bankers, and corporate executives sell their souls. Academics who succumb to intellectual capture sell their integrity. Dogmatists sell their minds. Yet we are not inclined to characterize such things as "prostitution"; nor are we inclined to call a lobbyist a Senator's "sugar daddy".

As we've seen, when sex is involved, it's a bit more complicated. Hookers sell their bodies for the duration of a trick; gold-diggers sell their bodies—and contrived affection—for the duration of the liaison / betrothal. All of this is a kind of prostitution. In the least opprobrious cases, those in dire straights are seeking a means to survive. In the most opprobrious cases, opportunists are valuing money over humanity. The former is tragic; the latter is odious. The former kind of prostitutes have regrettably lost their dignity, the latter kind of prostitutes have wantonly relinquished it.

What often elides this distinction is the fact that the former are typically forthcoming about what they're doing, whereas the latter put on airs. Hookers engage in prostitution overtly, without any pretense that they are doing otherwise. For doing what they do is a matter of desperation. By stark contrast, gold-diggers create a facade of super-charged dignity—even as they have none. (They misconstrue their vanity as dignity.) Doing what they do is a matter of avarice, so it invariably involves some sort of duplicity.

So when we pontificate about prostitution, are we thinking of corrupt politicians, bathing in graft; or are we thinking of solicitous scullery maids with a penchant for fellatio? The point is worth reiterating: Prostitution needn't be such a sordid spectacle. Another locution for the same phenomenon is "selling out"—something that politicians, entrepreneurs, and artists can do with their pants on.

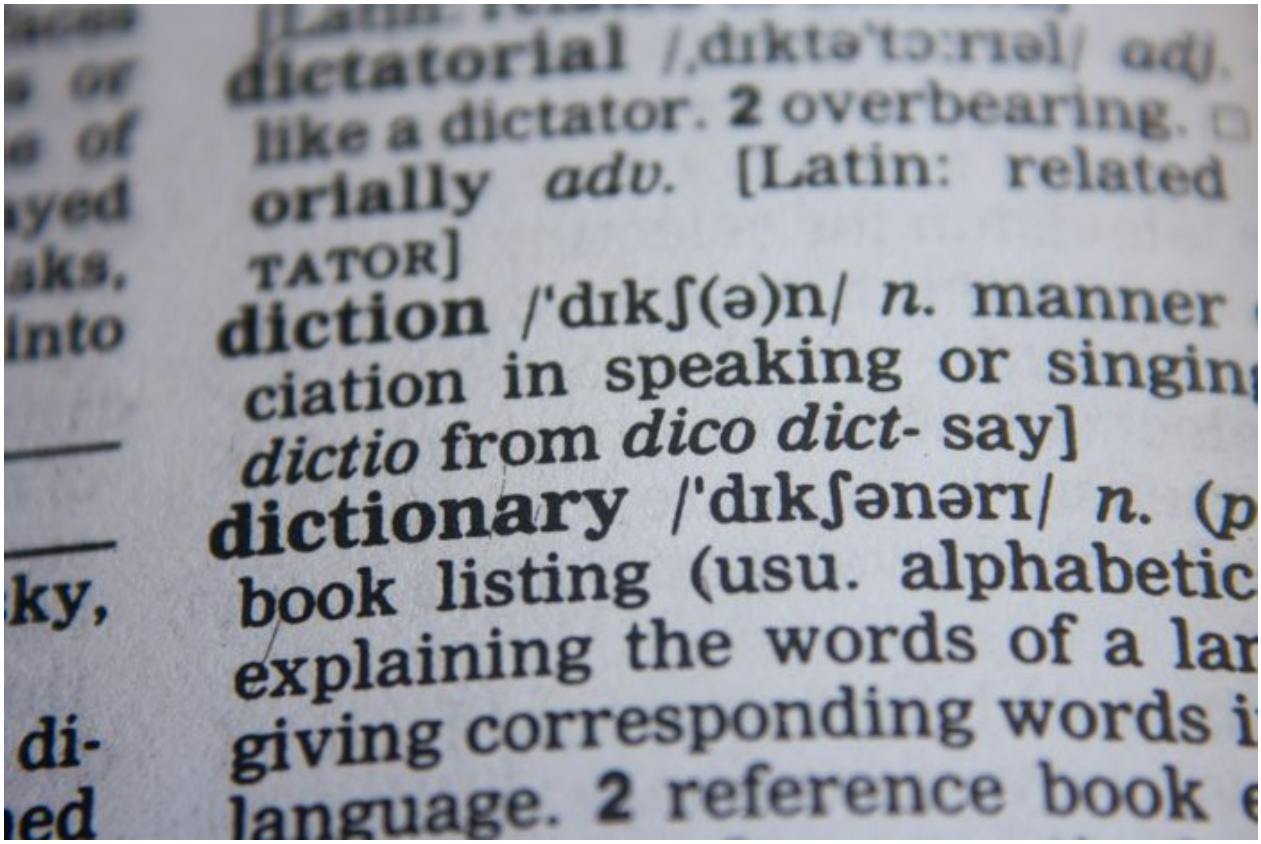
When assigning this loaded descriptor, we mustn't be distracted by pretenses. A grift is a grift. This taxonomic discrepancy is because we associate "prostitute" with debauchery rather than with sophistication; as if "selling out" (especially sexually) was strictly a function of low socio-economic status. Thus we accord towering stature to the dregs of humanity (standing in the halls of power) while impugning those who are often impoverished (standing on a street corner).

Such inconsistent classification is a reminder that demotic language can be misleading. It is no surprise that politicians, bankers, corporate executives, and gold-diggers are typically not given this derogatory characterization. We tend to oblige prostitutes who don't admit that they are prostitutes—even as they add a level of dishonesty to their gambit. While we are inclined to exalt the jaunty hedge-fund manager (who wreaks havoc on society), we are apt to scoff at the lowly street-walker (who's biggest crime is being party to some customers' infidelity). In keeping with this errant dichotomy, we assign the epithet "prostitute" exclusively to the menial sex worker; and reserve terms of approbation for august scoundrels.

These demimondes are seen as pariahs more than as victims. Stigmas prevail over formal conceptualization.

So what IS prostitution? In any given exchange, it comes down to whether or not one is compromising one's rectitude in order to advance one's socio-economic standing. This is also called "selling out". A simple litmus test is: Whenever one is deigning to "sell" something (be it political influence or sexual intercourse), one need only ask oneself: "In selling this, am I also selling my integrity?"

It just so happens that sex-for-financial-gain is the oldest–and most common–form of prostitution. A close second is graft. The former is tragedy; the latter is perfidy. But ALL of it is labeled the same thing: prostitution. Sometimes even the simplest words aren't so simple after all.



FOOTNOTES:

{1 More accurately, when “buffalo” is used as a verb, it means to coerce via intimidation. Bison and buffalo are technically two different kinds of bovine. The city of Buffalo is actually located in western New York state. Another version of this sentence contains seven, rather than eleven, words. But the object-phrase of the sentence–in the shorter version, just a single word–can be identical to the subject-phrase, which is comprised of five words; thus yielding: [subject-phrase] [verb] [object-phrase].}

{2 Other than buffalo (coerce), badger (harass), dog (addle), and horse (play), there are many occurrences of animal-names being used as verbs: ape, parrot, rat, weasel, ferret, fawn, snake, fish, bug, hound, etc. What’s the difference between “monkey around” and “horse around”? The same as the difference between going bananas and going nuts. (In other cases, words simply double as verbs and animal names due to lexical coincidence–as with hawk, fly, bear, carp, and yack.) When it comes to creative exploitation of semantic idiosyncrasies, it’s important not to be out-foxed.}

{3 That's not all. The descriptor "without qualification" can mean either "having insufficient credentials" (thus mitigated) or "no provisos, no catches" (thus unmitigated).}

{4 Likewise, there is a difference between "my closet is packed" (filled) and "my closet is packed up" (vacated). Of course, adding "up" does not ALWAYS change the meaning: "wrap it" and "wrap it up" typically mean the same thing (when veiling a gift in ornate paper); though the latter is also used to mean to finish a task. In the event that idiomatic expressions are involved, such idiosyncrasies complicate things–especially when one is translating from a language in which syntax (or word order) does not work in the same manner. "Screw it" intimates resignation whereas "screw it up" means sabotage. This is the difference between giving up and botching a job.}

{5 To "fuck around", "joke around", "horse around", and "monkey around" mean the same thing. In this context, "fuck" = "joke" = "horse" = "monkey". This is a reminder that literal translation goes haywire when it comes to idiomatic expressions.}

{6 This is the reason we forget that, in the northern hemisphere, days get SHORTER during most of the summer; as it is the period following the summer solstice (which falls around June 20). Our intuition tells us that the days are longer during the summer. In reality, the days between March 20 and June 20 have the same average length as those between June 20 and September 20.}

{7 Lincoln's party was, indeed, the LIBERAL party–at the time called the "Republicans". In fact, the left-most faction was called the "Radical Republicans". A clue that Lincoln would have been on the so-called "Left" was his great suspicion of corporate power. In a letter to Col. William F. Elkins dated November 21, 1864, he wrote: "I see in the near future a crisis approaching that un-nerves me and causes me to tremble for the safety of my country. As a result of the war, corporations have been enthroned; and an era of corruption in high places will follow. [Consequently], the money power of the country will endeavor to prolong its reign by working upon the prejudices of the people until all wealth is aggregated in a few hands and the Republic is destroyed. I feel at this moment more anxiety for the safety of my country than ever before, even in the midst of [the Civil War]."}

{8 This inversion of the meaning of “libertarianism” has been attributed to the polemicist, Murray Rothbard, who recognized that appropriating the term for free-market fundamentalism would be a boon to the cause. He was correct. After all, its root is “liberty”; and who could argue with THAT? Now, in America, if one uses “libertarian” in the original sense (as in: libertarian socialism), it is seen as oxymoronic. The original (Progressive) incarnation of “libertarianism” was populist in nature; so was consummate with civic-minded-ness. The RIGHT-WING incarnation of “libertarianism” amounts to “every man for himself; devil take the hindmost.” Hence to be a “libertarian” is the antithesis of being a socialist. The original “libertarianism” was, in fact, anarcho-syndicalism (the empowerment of the working class); whereas the term now entails what is effectively anarcho-capitalism (the empowerment of corporate power).}

{9 This is how both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, polar opposites in every conceivable way, can both be described as “populists”. Democratic socialists are populists (in one way), yet so are fascists (in an entirely different way). The former, it might be said, are GENUINE populists (have the best interests of the masses at heart); whereas the latter are FAUX populists (only appealing to the masses in superficial, though perfidious, ways). For a history of GENUINE (Left-wing) populism, see Thomas Frank’s “The People, No”.}

{10 There is often a blurred line between a finely-primped harem girl lackadaisically dangling grapes on a chaise lounge and, say, a sleazy barmaid in a dive-bar pounding shots of Jägermeister, legs akimbo. One demands a high sum for access to her body; the other is inclined to provide access to her body (and/or some ego-boosting sweet-talk) for a round of hastily-poured libations. As it turns out, prostitution attains irrespective of the amount of compensation…or the number of customers.}

{11 The “whore of Babylon” in Christian lore was probably an adaptation of the Avestan “Jahi” [“Jeh” in Pahlavi] from Zoroastrian lore. It was initially used to refer to the Roman Empire (the primary nemesis of Christianity); but was then used as a pejorative for ENEMIES OF the Roman Empire (which had become the political arm of the Church).}

{12 What of vocation? Employees don’t sell THEMSELVES; they sell their time / skills / knowledge; and typically do so without compromising their moral principles. Hence compensation for labor does not qualify as prostitution. Working for money isn’t a grift. Not every quid pro quo can be characterized as “selling out”.}

{13 A demonstration that such verbiage is nonsensical is a comment by Roman Catholic fanatic, Clarence Thomas—who referred to cells used from the fetuses procured from aborted pregnancies as “aborted children” (neglecting to apprehend that one aborts a PROCESS, not an ENTITY); and failing to recognize that stem-cell LINES are not the same as the cells taken from the original tissue. This category error is arguably even more absurd than the fallacious claim that an embryo is a “child” or “human being” (i.e. one that is “unborn”). According to such thinking, disposing of an acorn is destroying an oak tree. Clarence is effectively pro-zygote, anti-human; yet he glibly refers to himself as “pro-life”. Labeling such a position in this manner is a prime example of Orwellian verbiage. To suggest that a zygote / embryo is a full-fledged “human being” is not only fallacious; it is downright insane.}

{14 The category “nut” is a fuzzy one. In the strictest botanical sense: peanuts, walnuts, almonds, pecans, cashews, and pistachios are not nuts. But for dietary purposes, they are all considered as such. Meanwhile, acorns ARE technically nuts, but are not considered as such (again, for dietary purposes). This reminds us that categorization is sometimes context-dependent. Other misleading categories: tomatoes are technically fruit and cucumbers are technically berries. Such peculiarities remind us that, in everyday life, stigmas often take precedence over formal taxonomies.}

{15 Even masterpieces can be based on false premises. What is often considered the greatest film ever made (“Citizen Kane”) proceeded from an impossible quandary: Reporters trying to figure out what the protagonist’s final utterance (“Rosebud”) meant. The problem is that he died alone, so there was nobody present to hear him say it.}

Appendix:

Many stigmas develop which are based on misconceptions. For example, the vampire bats that attack prey and suck their blood are the FEMALES. An accurate analogue, then, would be female vampires.

Idiosyncratic naming does not only apply to everyday things. A misleading onomastic effect is most pronounced when it coming to BRANDING. Changing the name of companies is often done for image make-overs (that is: for rebranding purposes). This is for the simple reason that stigmas are often attached to monikers. This is why the Vatican re-branded the notorious “Inquisition” the “Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office” in 1908 (and then re-branded it again as the “[Sacred] Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith” in 1965). Yes, the Inquisition STILL EXISTS as a holy office in the Roman Catholic Church.

How we think about something is dictated, in part, by how we LABEL it. "Jerry's Guide to the World Wide Web" became "Yet Another Hierarchical Officious Oracle" (a.k.a. "Yahoo")…which was later re-named "Oath". Consider twenty more illustrations of this in the corporate world:

- Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) —> British Petroleum (BP)
- Standard Oil of California (SOCal) —> Chevron
- Datsun —> Nissan
- Blackwater —> Xe —> Academi {A}
- est —> Forum —> Landmark Worldwide
- Steven A. Cohen Capital Advisors —> Point72 Asset Management
- Sovereign Bank —> Santander Bank
- Bell Atlantic —> Verizon
- Amway —> Quixtar —> Amway (again)
- Aunt Jemima —> Pearl Milling Company
- Phillip-Morris —> Altria
- Facts —> Time-Life —> Time-Warner —> Spectrum
- Tribune Publishing —> tronc
- Clear Channel —> I Heart Media
- 4chan —> 8chan —> 8kun
- BackRub —> Google —> Alphabet
- TheFacebook —> Facebook —> Meta
- Odeo —> Twitter
- burbn —> Instagram
- Il Giornale —> Starbucks

As with any other re-branding, corporate re-branding is about creating an image; because–as with propaganda–marketing is ultimately about manipulating people's perceptions. Elucidating Reality has nothing to do with it. Propaganda is a kind of made-to-order folklore; just as folklore is often leveraged to serve propagandistic purposes.

Image-upgrades are often done to either erase unwanted stigmas or create new images to suit new exigencies. {B} Such image-engineering occurs in modern PR stunts as much as it does in any other institution's (strategically designed) interface with the masses. Whether promoting a consumer product or promulgating an ideology, what matters for stickiness and catchiness is how people PERCEIVE things. {C}

A classic case is the United States' Advanced Research Projects Agency. ARPA (1958) was re-named DARPA (1972) then back to ARPA (1993) before going back to DARPA again (1996). Appending / removing a "D" (for "defense") was done for purely political reasons–that is: to obfuscate the fact that the program was largely for OFFENSE; in keeping with the Orwellian re-labeling of the War Department.

Meanwhile, acronyms can take on a life of their own. Few people think of Home Box-Office, Bavarian Motor Works, and International Business Machines by their full names. This last started as TMC (Tabulating Machine Co.), then became CTR (Computer Tabulating Recording Corp.) before being named IBM; tracking with the emergence of the computer age. {D}

When it comes to HBO, which was originally established so that people could watch simulcast movies in their own home, the primary purpose of the company is now for television SERIES. Nobody depends on HBO for viewing films any longer; it is now a producer of original programming like the traditional networks (though generating revenue via subscription fees rather than commercials). Moreover, it is no longer limited to the home. Hence the acronym no longer makes any sense; though it remains intact for branding purposes.

Sometimes the name is changed for the sake of altering the image even as the institution remains exactly the same. In an Orwellian re-labeling that would make INGSOC shiver, the U.S. Department of War is now called the Department of Defense…even though it is almost entirely a department of military OFFENSE. {E}

It has never been anything other than a department of war; even after the cessation of the war(s) for which it was established. Meanwhile, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) was re-ramped to be the Clandestine Interventions Agency (CIA), euphemistically re-NAMED the "Central Intelligence Agency". {F}

The U.S. "Patriot Act" had superficial appeal because it kinda-sorta sounded like "act of patriotism" (even though it was nothing of the sort). The ruse was "it's there to protect you", when—in reality—it was designed to channel public funds into the military-industrial complex. Corporate welfare in the name of "security".

The problem is that people tend to fixate on iconography (be it labels or symbols) more than on what is actually represented–at any given time and place–by the moniker / the logo. Such semiotic swindles are usually effective. Semiotics is so powerful in part because we typically don't notice its tremendous power.

The “stigma trumps all else” feature of human psychology is a glitch in how we think. It is a semiotic blindspot that leads to myriad misconceptions. Take, for example, the swastika: a hallowed symbol in Hindu / Jain / Buddhist lore (representing good fortune and well-being) for millennia. Thanks to a 20th-century Austrian madman (who appropriated the symbol for his own deranged movement), its stigma was sullied in the Occident forevermore. Consequently, few Westerners (outside of Hindus, Jains, and Theravada Buddhists) care to recognize its original meaning. The negative stigma has—tragically—been deeply ingrained due to the heinous poignance that it still commands.

How we label things influences how we conceptualize what they are. This can happen with anything–from transnational corporations to culinary delights. Take, for example, toast that has been fried in egg batter. Is it French toast or Spanish toast or German toast? None of the above. The French call it “pain perdu” [lost bread] while the Spanish call it “torrija” and the Germans call it “Arme Ritter” [poor knights]. Many Indians simply refer to it as “Bombay toast”. It is actually a ROMAN concoction. The only people who seem to get it right are the Chinese, who accurately refer to it as “western toast”. The French call potatoes “apples of the earth”. And the breakfast treat is no more French than french kissing or french fries.

Pursuant to the elision of genealogy, sublimation occurs. Once something has been re-defined in the public consciousness, it tends to “lock in”; and its former incarnations are wiped away. It is important to understand human cognition in terms of (what philologists refer to as) “cognitive semantics” if we are to make sense of how we think about our most hallowed myths. Such critical scrutiny enables us to reverse-engineer the memeplexes that define how we perceive the world. The problem is that sanctified dogmatic systems are designed to prevent such critical scrutiny. In order to tout something as authentic, one is required to obdurately declare: “It’s been that way all along!”

Once we consecrate a meme, it is difficult to come to terms with the image-engineering that led it to where it is now. We like to think that the way we think of things today is the way they’ve always been.

{A The idea here was to go from private mercenaries for U.S. government hire to something that sounds more like a training facility for “security”. Either way, embodied the model for privatizing military functions under noble-sounding pretexts.}

{B …thereby shedding tainted reputations. It's why the Weinstein Company, once a juggernaut in Hollywood, is no longer known under that name.}

{C This can be as simple as Kentucky Fried Chicken re-christening itself Kitchen Fried Chicken so that it was no longer associated with "the south"; or Pizzeria Uno re-christening itself as Uno Chicago Grill so that was no longer primarily associated with pizza (as if merely a glorified pizza parlor); or Dunkin' Donuts re-christening itself as Dunkin' so that it was no longer primarily associated with donuts. Ireland's EirCom shortened its name to "Eir". For political correctness, Uncle Ben's rice was re-named "Ben's Original".}

{D Mnemonics is a key element of epidemiology (contagion theory). Mnemonic acumen is invariably a function of two things: simplicity (ease of recollection) and virality (contagiousness). These are symbiotic features. Hence many brands simply adopt acronyms for their public identity. International Business Machines, Bavarian Motor Works, and Home Box Office weren't alone in this strategy. America On-line became "AOL", Lucky Goldstar became "LG", and Kentucky Fried Chicken became "KFC". For decades, we knew the primary American networks only as ABC, CBS, and NBC. Few think of MSNBC as Microsoft NBC. There is a lot in a name–as is demonstrated by the "catchy" euphonic nature of drug names concocted by the Pharmaceutical industry (reminding us that a portmanteau is a catchy way to insert a subliminal message). This is also demonstrated by the tacky names of tech companies and the snazzy names of car models.}

{E This actually invokes the sports adage: the best defense is a good offense. Thus the D.O.D. is more accurately named the D.O.O. In any case, it is STILL the War Department, as it has almost nothing to do with genuine defense. This was made clear by the fact that a more genuinely defensive agency was established under the George W. Bush administration: the Department of Homeland Security. (Fun fact: The KGB is roughly translated as "Department of Homeland Security".) If the Pentagon really were a department of "defense", the DHS would have been redundant. The fact that the Neocons found the need to establish a new DEFENSIVE department revealed that the D.O.D. was never really about defending the homeland.}

{F (The NSA now takes care of intelligence-gathering.) Some of the CIA's most notorious failures of prognostication: The futility of the war in Vietnam in the 1960's, the fall of the Shah of Iran in 1979, the repercussions of abetting the mujahideen in Afghanistan during the 1980's, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990-91, the

attacks by “the Base” in 2001, the dire consequences of invading Iraq in 2003, and the imprudence of abetting the overthrow of Qaddafi in Libya in 2011. Other catastrophes include literally every intervention in Latin America for the last hundred years.}