

# COMMUNICATIONS

This paper argues that the jargon, or jabberwocky, prevalent in education from the universities on down, is the same kind of political lying found in government, and for the same purposes. Whether conscious or not, the aim is to enact power plays to preserve the existing bureaucratic structure and maintain leadership in the hands of those now in control. School, whose avowed purpose is to influence thinking and alter behavior into channels deemed appropriate by those in authority, is a political arena, and educational jabberwocky is its most effective tool.

JUNE K. EDWARDS\*

## Education and the Politics of Jabberwocky or A Cursory View of Methodological Means for Maximizing the Somnambulistic and/or Reactional Behavioral Reaction of Potential Recipients in the Process of Prolific Communication Education-Wise

“Beware the jabberwock, my son!  
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!”

Lewis Carroll

“Tis a gift to be simple,  
Tis a gift to be free.”

Folk Song

What is jabberwocky? It is the art of speaking sweet nothings — in a manner designed to impress, massage and manipulate its audience. It is not a modern affliction. It has no doubt been used in every age since man first began to use language to influence the behavior of others. Though in modern times it has found its best, or at least its most overt, outlet in Madison Avenue advertising and the politics of government, jabberwocky is not confined to particular areas. Just as politics, the art of power plays, pervades all human encounters, so does jargon-speaking, the art of manipulative persuasion which hides under the cloak of respectability. It is prevalent in science, social science, humanities, religion and education. In short, wherever humans speak and interact there is political action and there is jabberwocky.

The malady has been defined by numerous writers and called by an assortment of colorful terms. One writer refers to it as “high talk.”<sup>1</sup> The linguist, Mario Pei, prefers “weasel words.”<sup>2</sup> In George Orwell’s 1949 novel *1984*<sup>3</sup> and the earlier

\*June K. Edwards is a doctoral candidate in education at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

<sup>1</sup>Bertram E. Sproffkin, “High Talk, A Language Barrier,” *Peabody Journal of Education*. (January, 1967), p. 194.

<sup>2</sup>Mario Pei, *Doublespeak in America* (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1973), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup>George Orwell, *1984* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949).

essay, "Politics and the English Language,"<sup>4</sup> we find the terms "double think" and "Newspeak." The term most currently in vogue is "doublespeak."

What precisely is doublespeak? The most complete and frightening description is revealed in Orwell's *1984*. It is a dramatic story of the possible future of mankind if such an aberration is allowed to dominate our language. In order to understand the implications of the disease, it is necessary to be specific about the symptoms. Therefore a résumé of the nature of the grammar is given as a "how-to" for anyone not yet a practitioner. (Is there such an animal?) Or a consciousness-raiser (see #10) for the rest of us.

1. The key to effective jabberwocky is to eliminate the use of simple verbs. Instead, make verbs into phrases made up of a noun or adjective tacked on to some general purpose verb such as prove, serve, play, render, etc. Thus we can have: render inoperative, serve the purpose of, play a leading role in, and prove unacceptable.

2. It is imperative to pad the majority of sentences (or better yet *all* sentences) with extra syllables, rather than search for the *one* word that is explicit. Worn-out clichés (such as that one) are preferred. Good examples are: make contact with, make mention of, be subjected to, give rise to, have the effect of, make itself felt, and exhibit a tendency to.

3. Use the passive voice wherever possible in place of the active. This helps to deaden any feeling that ideas are alive, or that people are responsible for their actions.

4. Use noun constructions in place of gerunds: by examination of, instead of examining.

5. Use "-ise" and "de-" forms to further cut down the range of verbs. And the use of the "un"-form will make even the most innocuous and banal statement sound profound: "The speech that he delivered was not un-verbal."

6. Use pretentious diction wherever possible. Orwell lists such words as: phenomenon, categorical, veritable, and virtual. These have become so engrained that perhaps they do not seem pretentious today. A more current list would probably include: viable, operative, scenario, input, innovation, conceptualization, relevant, and framework. All the "with-it" words.

7. The use of foreign words is particularly effective. *Deus ex machina*, *status quo*, *Weltanschauung*, *nouveau riche* will impress even the most educated.

8. Replace simple conjunctions and prepositions with phrases: with respect to, having regard for, the fact that, in view of, on the hypothesis that. More padding.

9. Another important feature is to interchange various forms of speech. Verbs become nouns (maximization) and nouns become verbs (finalize). Adjectives can be formed by adding "-ful" to the noun (meaningful), and adverbs formed by adding "-wise" (learning-wise). If one is consistent, the result will be the elimination of all existing adverbs and adjectives, thus cutting the English language to a bare minimum of vogue nouns and verbs.

10. Compound words also cut down word searching: role-play, situation-centred, other-directed, work-oriented. The noun-verb combination reduces the need for any adjectives or adverbs whatsoever.

<sup>4</sup>George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1968), Vol. IV, p. 127-140.

11. Doublespeak has its culmination in euphemism — the perfuming of earthy or commonplace words. No one dies in our society, they pass on, or pass away, or become deceased. They are buried not by a gravedigger but by a mortician or funeral director or a grief therapist. In the world of mundane work, janitors become maintenance men or sanitary engineers, and garage mechanics become automotive internists.<sup>5</sup>

The basic ingredients of jabberwocky, or doublespeak, are verbosity and vagueness, covered with a frosting of pretentiousness. Orwell states that “prose consists less of *words* chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more of *phrases* tacked together like sections of a pre-fabricated henhouse.”<sup>6</sup> A master of such jargon can eventually produce sentences that mean *anything* — or better yet, *nothing* at all. It only takes practice, an enormous ego, and a disrespect for both language as a tool of humanity and of the human beings themselves.

Yet few people have developed the ability to spot anything but the most obvious of jabberwocks. Socialization has enveloped us in the jargon; fogged our vision so that we cannot recognize even our own versions of doublespeak let alone that of the professional experts. The problem lies in the nature of language. Daniel Dieterich writes “Language is imprecise, unable to convey the truth in its entirety. Moreover, language is but a tool; and as such it may be turned to whatever ends its user consciously or unconsciously desires.”<sup>7</sup>

Not only can few people recognize jabberwocky, even fewer have the gift of simple speech, the art of saying what they mean in a way understood by all. As we shall see, politics is a fertile ground for doublespeak. Only a few leaders in all history defied the tradition and spoke to the public humbly and clearly. Therein, perhaps, lies their greatness.

In 1940 Hitler’s armies were lined up along the English Channel ready to wreak devastation on an England unprepared for total war. Winston Churchill, a master of the down-to-earth phrase, aroused his people with this simple, declarative sentence “I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.” Then he turned to America and said “Give us the tools, and we will finish the job.” Wallace Carroll notes facetiously that he did not say, “Supply us with the necessary inputs of relevant equipment and we will implement the program and accomplish its objectives.”<sup>8</sup>

In the same vein, one can look to the writers of the New Testament for sources of simplicity and abiding wisdom. “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Not “Express overt affection for the individual residing in the adjacent domicile according to the same degree of affection that you render unto your own being.”

And finally, another Churchill story: During World War II, the admiralty officials sent a note asking permission to build a strategic bridge. It read “Permission is urgently requested for the immediate implementation of this directive.” Churchill sent it back with a note in the margin. “If you mean should you build the bridge, build it — do it — Carry on!”<sup>9</sup>

The significance, however, of jabberwocky is more than pretentiousness, more

<sup>5</sup>Orwell, *Politics*, p. 130-135.

<sup>6</sup>Orwell, *Politics*, p. 130.

<sup>7</sup>Daniel Dieterich and David Isaacson, “ERIC/RCS Report: Doublespeak,” *English Journal*, (October, 1973), p. 1053-5.

<sup>8</sup>Wallace Carroll, “Murder of English,” *Education Digest*, (October, 1970), p. 31.

<sup>9</sup>Sprofskin, p. 195.

than obtuseness because one is vague and unsure of ideas, more than slovenliness or a lack of appreciation for the value of language. Says Dieterich "At the heart of the matter is the lie. It is more than simply a matter of inelegant word choice. It is a threat not only to language but to thought."<sup>10</sup>

This is precisely the message implicit in *1984*. "The special function of certain Newspeak words was not so much to express meanings as to destroy them. They had their meanings extended until they contained whole batteries of words which could then be scrapped and forgotten."<sup>11</sup> By creating the noun-verb construction "Crimethink," the government deleted all "criminal" words such as honour, justice, morality, equality. Deleted them from the language, and thus from thought, and thus from existence.

In the same manner every organization, body of people, doctrine, country, institution and public building was given a single, easily pronounceable word with the smallest number of syllables to preserve its original title. In today's world, this would mean such titles as NATO, NASA, and ERIC. Who remembers what the initials originally stood for? Who cares? The abbreviation was done with a conscious purpose. By doing so, a name was narrowed and the meaning subtly altered by removing from consciousness all the original associations.<sup>12</sup>

Newspeak was designed in *1984* not to *extend* a thought but to *diminish* it. This was done principally by cutting the choice of words down to a minimum. Today's doublespeak serves the same purpose. Not only does it diminish words and thus thoughts, it also massages the listeners into apathy and then manipulates their behavior.

Marshall McLuhan is the prophet in our time who exposes the massaging ability of *any* communication. Spoken and written words, he claims, are only a small element in all the myriad methods of communicating values and ideas. But we shall deal here only with words. In McLuhan's view it is not so much *what* is being said as *how*: "In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message."<sup>13</sup> Or, as the title of his later book says "The medium is the message."<sup>14</sup>

And what *is* the message of doublespeak? Orwell says, "Double think means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them."<sup>15</sup> This appears to be a primary attribute of the leadership of any bureaucratic, hierarchical institution, whether it be government, church or education. Let us see how this ability actually manifests itself in social situations. We will confine ourselves in this paper to only two, but very influential, areas — the politics of government and the politics of education.

Books could be (and have been) written about the proliferation of doublespeak in political campaigns, in foreign policy, and in domestic government. In the last decade the art of doublespeak has developed to a degree unknown, or at least un-mass-communicated (How's that for Newspeak?) before. Joe McGinniss's book,

<sup>10</sup>Dieterich, p. 1054.

<sup>11</sup>Orwell, *1984*, p. 308.

<sup>12</sup>Orwell, *1984*, p. 309.

<sup>13</sup>Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Signet Books, 1964).

<sup>14</sup>Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Message* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967).

<sup>15</sup>Orwell, *1984*, p. 215.

*The Selling of the President, 1968*, is a graphic portrayal of the extent to which presidential candidates, in this case Richard Nixon, understand and use the art of doublespeak to project an image acceptable to whatever constituents are being wooed at a given moment. To hold two (Only two?) contradictory beliefs simultaneously and accept both is not considered an act of *lying* in a political campaign, it is a necessary means of selling, and thus electing, a president.<sup>16</sup>

The Watergate hearings of last year were a jargon-collector's dream, and a nightmare of realistic politics. Nobody ever *said* anything, they "indicated" it. Bugging was euphemized into "intelligence gathering," breaking the law was simply doing something "inappropriate," and burglary was only an "entry." The defendants were expert at using the passive voice, and thus escaping responsibility for any "inappropriate" action. "*We* had a meeting and *it* was decided that . . ." No one ever admitted *who* made the decision. The intent of such talk is to spread an aura of vagueness over the whole affair so that nobody is held responsible.<sup>17</sup>

How does all this relate to education? First of all, this paper assumes that politics, the art of competitive power plays, is very much alive and well and living in all aspects of the educational world — from the top of the hierarchy to the lowest rung.

Because the conscious and *avowed* aim of schools (not to mention the hidden aspects) is to influence the thinking and alter the behavior of students into channels deemed appropriate by those in authority, *all* relationships are political ones: teacher and student, faculty and administration, administrators and school board, school personnel and community, and all the multiple combinations therein. Education (schooling) *is* politics.

To show the extent to which jabberwocky is enmeshed in education circles, an ingenuous method has been proposed for the uninitiated educator who wishes to join the jargon club. It will be explained here in detail as a supplement to the earlier guide on doublespeak.

After attending a national education conference and hearing the ubiquitous obfuscations normally presented at such meetings, Murray Horowitz perused the printed lists of paper titles and devised a chart from which each person can select "instant verbiage." The advantage of obtaining his list is that one no longer needs to think up the phrases oneself. It is simpler to string pre-chosen words together. The chart is divided into three columns: verbs, adjectives, and substantives. A sampling is given below:

| <i>Verbs</i> | <i>Adjectives</i> | <i>Substantives</i>     |
|--------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| articulate   | authoritarian     | ability factors         |
| assess       | bureaucratic      | behavioral research     |
| coordinate   | burgeoning        | campus climate          |
| denigrate    | charismatic       | cognitive factors       |
| evaluate     | collegial         | communication structure |

Instant verbiage consists of choosing one from each column and putting them together in order. Thus we can have "assess bureaucratic cognitive factors," or, if one digs Agnewesque, "coordinate charismatic campus climate." The creativity comes in deciding what method to use for selection. Since his list is lengthy, Horowitz suggests the number approach, one's birthday for instance: April 14, 1921

<sup>16</sup>Joe McGinniss, *The Selling of the President, 1968* (New York: Trident Press, 1969).

<sup>17</sup>Michael T. Malloy, "But Will Doublespeak Succumb?," *The National Observer*, (April 27, 1974), p. 7.

(4-14-21) would give you “denigrate institutional operationalizing.”<sup>18</sup> (Personally I prefer his “close your eyes and stick a pin” method. It’s more spontaneous.)

Examples of educational jabberwocky are multitudinous. (A careful reading of this paper is sure to produce hundreds.) Euphemism-wise, nurseries have become “early learning centres” and libraries “instructional materials resource centres.” Educational journals are padded with pretentious and imprecise phrases: “life situational factors,” “behavioral and value styles,” “structural dependency,” “understanding the key dimension of,” “feel functionally cut off.”<sup>19</sup>

Jargon is also incorporated into administrative titles. An educator in Binghamton, N.Y., identifies herself as an “Associate for Institutional Relations and Title II Schedules of the Upper Susquehanna Regional Supplementary Educational Services.”<sup>20</sup> Do it — carry on!

And nowhere is jabberwocky more refined than in the drawing up of foundation grant proposals. They are always in *frameworks* to be viewed from the proper *perspective*. *Guidelines* are charted, which are *flexible*. *Bold thrusts*, *dramatic approaches*, and *pioneer breakthroughs* are the *potential aims*. Money is never mentioned — only resources, expenditures, allocations, appropriations and funds.<sup>21</sup>

Richard Redfern, who collects educational jargon as a hobby, has found a goldmine in educational journals. “A master of jargon,” he says, “can produce a sentence so vague it can be dropped into dozens of other articles and books. ‘At what levels is coverage of the field important?’ Even in context it is hard to attach meaning to *that* sentence.”<sup>22</sup>

Terence Moran claims that “the sad truth seems to be that the language of education is largely the language of trivia.” When a student has demonstrated his proficiency in the public schools, he moves up to participate in “the more esoteric and demanding game of minutia sometimes called ‘specialization’ or ‘doctoral dissertation.’”<sup>23</sup> And Carroll crowns the condemnation by asserting that educators have a passion for pompous and opaque expression. “Our universities have become jargon factories; let someone find an awkward, inflated way to say a simple thing and the whole academic pack will take it up.”<sup>24</sup>

But is there more involved than just ego-centred pomposity and muddy-thinking opaqueness? Definitely yes. Just as in the political language of government, the political language of education has as its aim, whether conscious or not, the desire to eradicate individual thinking, dull the senses and manipulate behavior. When a listener is mesmerized by high-flown speech into thinking he has heard an idea when he has not, he is being lied to and he is lying to himself.

A recent newspaper story illustrates the point. Three Southern California medical educators perpetrated a hoax experiment to test the jargon-consciousness of educated people. They hired a professional actor, gave him an impressive curriculum vitae, and had him lecture to three groups of psychiatrists, psychologists

<sup>18</sup>Murray M. Horowitz, “How to Articulate Authoritarian Ability Factors,” *School and Society*, (March 2, 1968), p. 138-40.

<sup>19</sup>Pei, p. 182.

<sup>20</sup>“New Peak for Newspeak,” *Newsweek*, (May 6, 1968), p. 104.

<sup>21</sup>Newsweek, p. 105.

<sup>22</sup>Richard K. Redfern, “A Brief Lexicon of Jargon,” *College English* (May, 1967), p. 600-2.

<sup>23</sup>Terence P. Moran, “The Language of Education,” Neil Postman, Charles Weingartner, and Terence P. Moran, ed., *Language in America* (New York: Pegasus, 1969), p. 104.

<sup>24</sup>Carroll, p. 30.

and social workers. The “lecturer” loaded his talk with academic jargon and doubletalk, citing one irrelevant, contradictory and meaningless statement after another. Responses on the questionnaire distributed afterwards ranged from “excellent presentation,” “extremely articulate,” and “good flow” to “too intellectual.” None seemed aware that they had been duped.<sup>25</sup>

The purpose of doublespeak in education, as elsewhere, is linked to power plays, to preserving the existing bureaucratic structure and to maintaining leadership in the hands of those now in control — whether they be university professors or administrative officials or any other level of authority. When a teacher states that an overachieving child has a negative self-concept, what parent will say (or even think). “That’s untrue! It’s impossible to *overachieve*. If he can do it, he has the ability.” When an administrator declares with pride that his schools have a “child-centred, individualized instructed, and media-oriented curriculum,” how many shout “Then why can’t the kids read!”

And when a professor of education writes “What is needed is an overall rationale which integrates policy making implications of each evolutionary phase into a consistent framework for present day training,” what student dares to say “What do you *mean*? I think you’re trying to snow me with your expertise, maintain your superior status and pretend you know more about the ‘real’ world than I. I won’t be suckered.”

George Orwell summed up this point well. “In our society, those who have the best knowledge of what is happening are also those who are furthest from seeing the world as it is. In general, the greater the understanding, the greater the delusion; the more intelligent, the less sane.”<sup>26</sup> Could this have application to education departments in our universities? (I’m not sure, actually, if Orwell’s statement is a condemnation or a tribute.)

In summary, then, jabberwocky is an ancient and effective art form, intimately related to the ancient game of politics. In fact, the two are married — and imbued with all the implications of that sacred institution. In all human interactions can be found competitive power plays and the use of language to manipulate thought and behavior. All human encounters are political actions and reactions. Because language is imprecise and non-stagnant, it is a natural tool for political use. In its simple, unadorned form it can be a way of freedom from coercion through clear thinking, a positive relating to other human beings and individual expression. But in education, as in all other areas, the dangers of doublespeak, of weasel words, of jabberwocky, is that when our minds become mastered by political forces outside ourselves, our lives lose meaning and value. We cease to exist except as bricks to hold up the controlling power structure.

’Tis a gift — a rare, treasured and badly needed gift — to be simple, and thus free. Beware the Jabberwock!

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<sup>25</sup>“An Exercise in Educational Flimflam,” *Parade*, (May 12, 1974), p. 5.

<sup>26</sup>Orwell, 1984, p. 216.