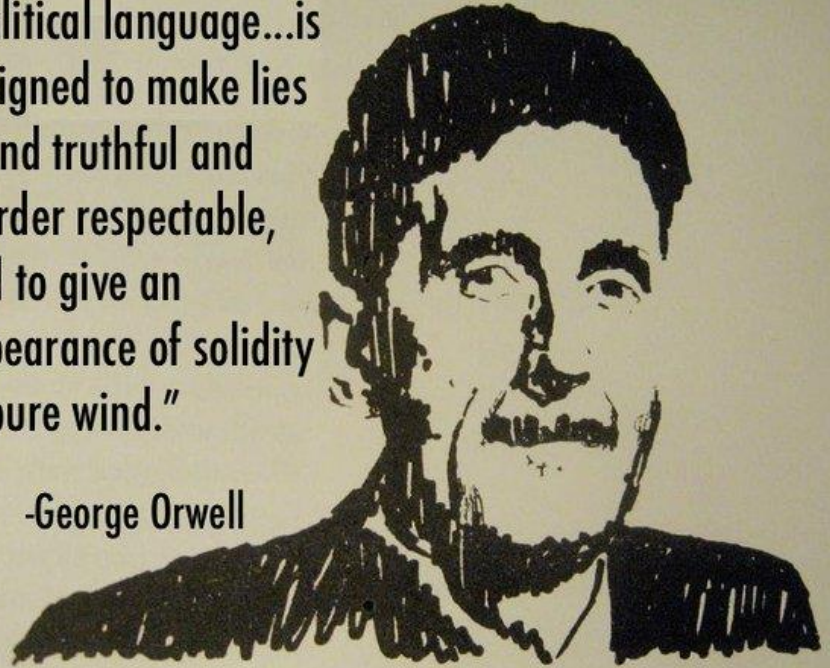


"Political language...is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind."

-George Orwell



# Language and Meaning

Slippery words

# Subjective and Objective Meaning

- Language is used to talk about the real (objective) world.
- E.g. the word 'Paris' refers to a real, objective city in Europe. That's its objective meaning, or "referent".
- (By contrast, 'Hogwarts' has no objective meaning.)

# Subjective and Objective Meaning

- But words don't connect *directly* to the real world. Rather, they express ideas in our minds, which may (or may not) correspond to real objects in the world.
- Each person has a “subjective world”, or epistemic state, which is their “take” on the world, or the world as they see it.

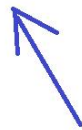
# Subjective and Objective Meaning

- In my subjective world, for example, there is a European city called 'Paris'. This is my *idea* of Paris. I haven't been to Paris since about 1987, so my idea of Paris is likely somewhat different from the real place today.



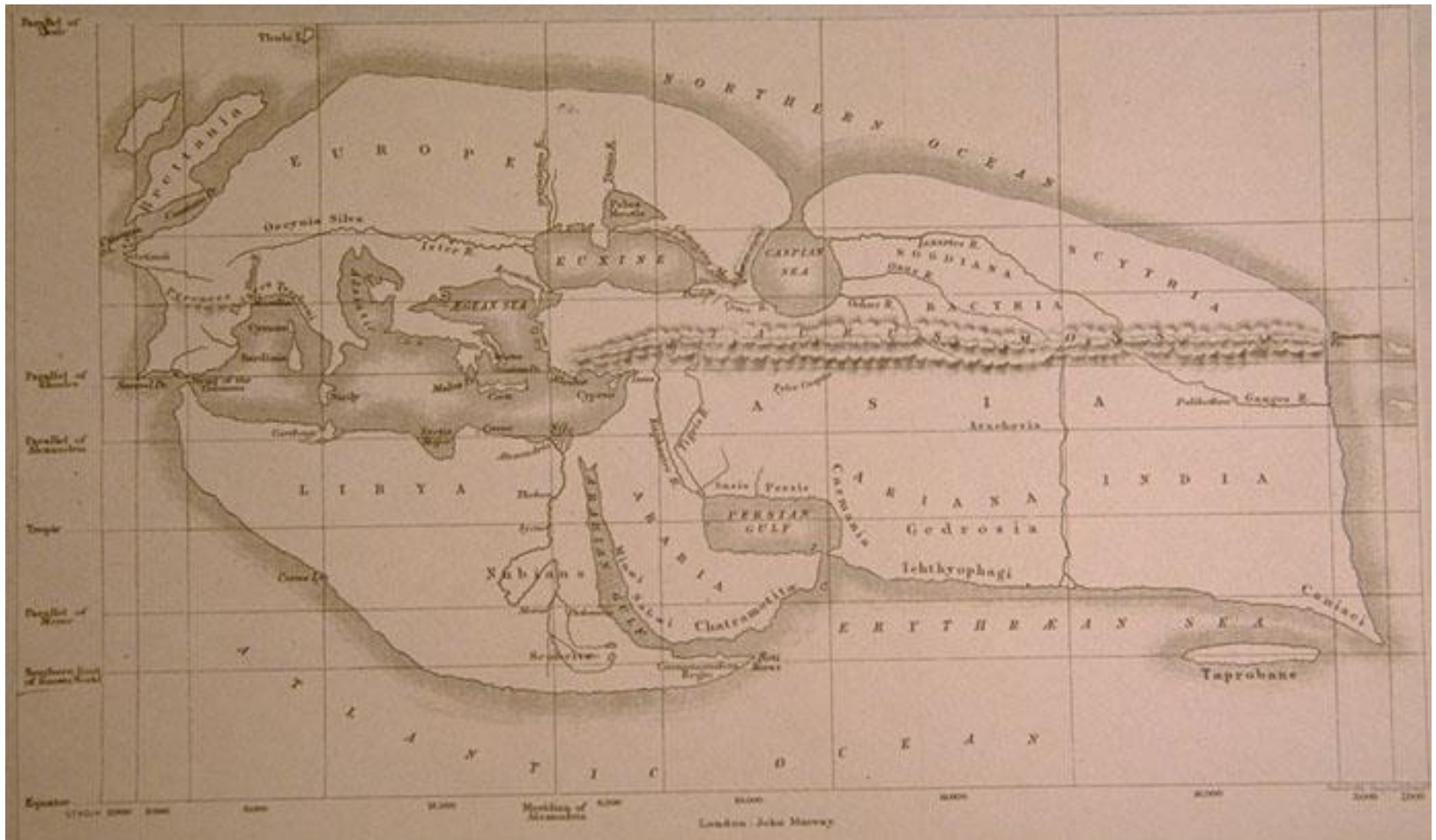
Subjective meaning

Objective meaning



"Hogwarts"

# “The world” of Eratosthenes, 194 BC



# One meaning or two?

- Early astronomers identified the “Morning Star”, a planet which sometimes appeared in the east before sunrise.
- They also identified the “Evening Star”, a different planet which sometimes appeared in the west after sunset.
- What names do these planets have today?

# One meaning or two?

- At that time, did the names “the Morning Star” and “the Evening Star” have the same meaning? Or different meanings?
  - They referred to the same planet, Venus.
  - (The same *objective* meaning.)
- They were different ideas, as they were two different planets in their subjective world.



# Example

Lois Lane believes that Superman can fly  
Superman is, in fact, Clark Kent

---

∴ Lois Lane believes that Clark Kent can fly

**Journalist** – You criticize the Miranda ruling, which gives suspects the right to have a lawyer present before police questioning. Shouldn't people, who may be innocent, have such protection?

**A.G.** – Suspects who are innocent of a crime should. But the thing is, you don't have many suspects who are innocent of a crime. That's contradictory. If a person is innocent of a crime, then he is not a suspect ...

- N.B. There's a difference between being innocent *in fact*, and being *known* to be innocent!

*Engineer:* I've completed my inspection of the new bridge, and found no issues at all. I'm certifying the bridge as safe for public use. It's finally safe to cross.

*Public:* Wait a minute. The bridge right now is physically identical to how it was this morning. So if it's safe now, then it was safe then, before your inspection.

*Engineer:* Look -- It isn't safe until we *know* it's safe!

# Bike lanes make cycling safer?

- It's unclear whether riding in a bike lane is *objectively* safer than on the road. (I.e. the actual risk of injury, etc.) It depends on the exact design details.
  - Recent (better) designs do seem to improve safety
- But, for most people, riding in a segregated lane *feels* safer. I.e. it's subjectively safer.

# The Subjective Voice

- Historians often speak in what might be called the “subjective voice”, i.e. they describe events using the subjective world of people who lived at the time.

“For Ptolemy the sun was a very special planet. Not only was it the source of light for the universe – its orbit around the earth also regulated the orbits of all the other planets (apart from the moon).”

# Is there an objective world?

“Elements of what we call ‘language’ or ‘mind’ penetrate so deeply into what we call ‘reality’ that the very project of representing ourselves as being ‘mappers’ of something ‘language-independent’ is fatally compromised from the start. Realism is an impossible attempt to view the world from Nowhere.”

(Richard Rorty, “World Well Lost”)

**7. Describe the mistake committed in the following paragraph.**

Some people say that all moral goodness comes from God, or even that the whole concept of *good* makes no sense in the absence of God. Yet this view is exploded by the fact that many atheists, who don't believe in God at all, are very good people.

(compare to this)

- Some people claim that all the power in a standard car, even the electrical power from the battery, ultimately comes from the engine. But that can't be right. I have this crazy uncle who doesn't even believe in engines, but he drives his car just fine.



# Lie, or be slippery?


- A lot of what people say, either in person or through mass media, is simply false.
- E.g. Boris Johnson (mayor of London) writing in *The Telegraph*,  
“The hills and dales of Britain are being forested with white satanic mills, and yet the total contribution of wind power is still only about 0.4 per cent of Britain’s needs.” **(The real figure was 5.3% at the time.)**

# Lie, or be slippery?

- So, if you want to mislead people, lying is definitely an option.
- But is there a downside to lying? Can it be costly?
- Yes. Outright lies can often be exposed, leading to embarrassment and damage to one's reputation, even lawsuits.

# Lie, or be slippery?

- If you want to mislead people, hide sensitive information, etc. an alternative to outright lies is to use *slippery language*, e.g.:
  - Vague language
  - Cherry picking
  - Ambiguous language
  - Intimidating and obscure jargon
  - Emotionally loaded words
  - Weasel words



lie

truth

# Part 2

Vagueness and cherry picking

# Vagueness

- Vague terms are those that *apply to a wide range of situations*.
- E.g. “there are between 5 and 100 people in this room”
- Precise terms apply to only a narrow range of cases. (E.g. “25-30 people”.)

# Vagueness

- Is vague language ok, or is it a problem?
  - It depends. When approximate information is all we need, then vague language is fine. It's quicker to collect vague information, easier to communicate, etc.
  - People who insist on precision at all times can be very tedious!

(A new employee is making casual conversation, to get to know new colleagues.)

“How long have you been working here for?”

“I’m not sure. Let me check my planner ... [10 minutes later] ... So I’ve been working here 2 years, 39 days and about 84 minutes.”

(“a couple of years” would be better here.)



But in other circumstances, vague language can be deceitful. Here are some of the factors that lead to vagueness being a problem.

- The speaker has more precise information, and is withholding it by being vague.
- The audience wants/needs more precise information.
- By being vague, the speaker gives the impression that there is no better information to be had.

# The Rule of Honest Communication

- When communicating honestly, we say the *strongest* thing we believe, that is relevant to the subject.
- That is, we give the *maximum* information we have on the subject, as long as we think it's relevant to the audience's needs.
- “The truth, **the whole truth**, and nothing but the truth”

# Giving part of the truth



(The *whole* truth is that Sally is top of the class!)

## Is the vagueness intended to deceive?

- (i) “I have a bunch of chicken here on the barbecue, enough for everyone.” \_\_\_\_\_
- (ii) “There’s a chance of rain tomorrow afternoon”  
\_\_\_\_\_
- (iii) “It’s possible that parts of my essay are related to passages in Wikipedia” \_\_\_\_\_
- (iv) “Gordon Campbell has been arrested by the police, but not more than 5 times” \_\_\_\_\_

# Cherry Picking

- Through being “economical with the truth”, one can mislead people while making only true statements.
- One “cherry picks” certain pieces of information to reveal, while hiding others. The intent of this is to give a misleading picture of what is happening. (E.g. Sally is doing pretty well in the class, but no more.)

**facebook**  
you



**REAL**  
you



Can you cherry-pick statements from the following passage to make Edison look like a hero? A villain?

“Edison is described in history books as a creative inventor, though many of the inventions he patented were actually developed by his staff. He did invent the first phonograph, as well as many devices that improved the telegraph. He is best remembered for inventing the light bulb. Though in fact many people had made light bulbs before, Edison figured out how to make it long-lasting and efficient, and put it into commercial production. Edison pioneered the supply of electricity to street lights and homes, via wires carrying DC electricity. Later it became clear that AC electricity was a superior technology, but because someone else had the patents to AC, Edison waged a propaganda campaign against AC to make it seem dangerous. He killed an elephant with AC electricity, for example, and filmed it to show people the destructive power of AC.”

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# Hero!!

- “Edison is described in history books as a creative inventor, having invented the first phonograph, many improvements to the telegraph, and household electricity supply. He is best remembered for inventing the light bulb, which he perfected and made available to ordinary people – literally bringing light to the masses.”

# Villain ...

- “Edison did not invent many of the devices he is remembered for; instead he profited from the inventions of others. When the development of superior AC electricity threatened to cut into his profits, he waged a ruthless propaganda campaign to make AC seem dangerous, even going so far as to electrocute a helpless elephant, and show it on TV. What a guy.”

# Using spurious conditionals

A -- “You cheated on your exam! I have proof!”

B -- “If I did cheat, then I obviously had a very good reason.”

By saying “*If* I did cheat”, B is not admitting that he cheated, while at the same time defending the action. Pretty neat!

# Fuzzy boundaries

- So far we've been looking at vague terms with sharp boundaries, such as "this product contains at least 45% meat products".
- Many vague terms don't have such sharp boundaries. It's just not clear exactly what they apply to.
- E.g. How many grains of sand are needed to count as a "heap" of sand?

Fuzzy boundaries can also lead to problems ...

“While we would like to legislate against sweatshops, the problem is that it’s impossible to draw a sharp line between sweatshops and legitimate factories. If a sweatshop worker’s hourly pay is gradually increased, one cent at a time, at what exact point does she cease to be exploited? Clearly, such legislation is impractical.”

“You want an extension on your paper, and I’m inclined to grant it, as you have special circumstances. But consider the consequences. Others will find out that I gave you an extension, and want one as well. Their reasons might not be as good as yours, but it’s impossible to draw a *sharp line* between sufficient and insufficient grounds for an extension. Therefore I have to treat everyone the same way, and grant no extensions.”

# Part 3

- 3.1 The (mis)use of ambiguity

# Ambiguity

- An ambiguous word or sentence has two or more possible meanings.
- Unlike a vague term, however, an ambiguous term has just one *intended* meaning each time it is used.
- The problem is that it's not always clear which meaning that is!



*Doctor:* Your weight is above normal, for someone of your height and build. You should avoid eating snacks between meals, and get more exercise.

*Patient:* But I read in the paper that Canadians have gotten a lot heavier over the past twenty years. It's now quite normal to be the weight I am!

N.B. The word 'natural' is similarly ambiguous, as it can mean just 'a product of nature', or something healthy and legitimate.

E.g.

- “My pedophilia is *natural*. I was born this way.”
- N.B. “born this way” ≠ genetic ≠ healthy
  - E.g. FAS (fetal alcohol syndrome) is congenital (present from birth) but not genetic.
  - There are many genetic disorders (Down’s syndrome, cystic fibrosis, Marfan syndrome)

# hate

[hāt] 

## VERB

1. feel intense or passionate dislike for (someone).

"the boys hate each other" · [\[more\]](#)

*synonyms:* [loathe](#) · [detest](#) · [dislike greatly](#) · [abhor](#) · [abominate](#) · [despise](#) · [execrate](#) · [\[more\]](#)

## NOUN

1. intense or passionate dislike.

"feelings of hate and revenge"

*synonyms:* [loathing](#) · [hatred](#) · [detestation](#) · [dislike](#) · [distaste](#) · [abhorrence](#) · [abomination](#) · [\[more\]](#)

# violence

['vɪ(ə)ləns] 

NOUN

behavior involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something.

*synonyms:* brutality · brute force · roughness · ferocity · fierceness · savagery · cruelty · sadism · barbarity · barbarousness · brutishness · murderousness · bloodthirstiness · [more]

- strength of emotion or an unpleasant or destructive natural force.

"the violence of her own feelings"

*synonyms:* intensity · severity · strength · force · great force · vehemence · powerfulness · power · potency · ferocity · forcefulness · wildness · frenziedness · fury · [more]

- *law*

the unlawful exercise of physical force or intimidation by the exhibition of such force.

Find vagueness, spurious conditionals, cherry-picking, ambiguity, etc. in the following conversation.

*Journalist:* Your employment history has a gap around 1997-8. What were you doing at that time?

*Politician:* I was taking a break from my normal activities, at a place in the country.

*Journalist:* I've done a little investigation, and found that you were in jail for fraud. Can you tell our readers about that?

*Politician:* Well, if I was in jail, as you claim, then it would have been the result of an unfortunate mistake, made long, long ago.

*Journalist:* How long were you jailed for?

*Politician:* Oh, a number of days.

*Journalist:* How many days, exactly?

*Politician:* You expect me to remember an exact number? It was so long ago!

*Journalist:* You were jailed for 624 days. But this 'mistake', as you put it, involved transferring \$151,000, without authorisation, into a private account of yours. Did you do that accidentally?

*Politician:* I find it hard to recall the exact circumstances, from so long ago. You have to realise that, as Chief Financial Officer, I was in charge of many millions of dollars, and completed dozens of transactions each day. Do you ever make mistakes in your job?



# Real case of “side guards” on trucks

“Unfortunately, side guards are not a guarantee of safety. Transport Canada has not found research data indicating that side guards would be effective in Canada. Studies completed don’t provide sufficient evidence to move forward with a regulation.”

(Mélanie Emma Quesnel, spokeswoman for Transport Canada)

Identify any aspects of the statement above that appear slippery, and might be intentionally misleading. (Briefly explain what seems problematic with the statement.)

# Equivocation

- Equivocation is using two meanings of a word in the same passage. The writer starts with one meaning, but then artfully shifts to another meaning.

“The Press should report on matters that are in the public interest. There is intense public interest in the private lives of movie stars. Therefore, the Press should report on the private lives of movie stars.”

“Only the uneducated take seriously the idea that quality of life has declined since industrialisation, that things used to be slower, or simpler, or that people had a stronger sense of belonging to a place and a community. In almost every measurable respect, quality of life has steadily improved over the past two centuries. Not only has the Gross Domestic Product increased, but so have life expectancy, infant survival rates, and disposable income.”

N.B. Youth suicide rates (e.g.) don't correlate well with per-capita GDP. (Canada is 10x higher than Peru.)

# MOTTE AND BAILEY CASTLE



# MOTTE AND BAILEY CASTLE



- The earth is warming due to increased CO<sub>2</sub>.

“Climate Change”

- Wind and solar can replace fossil fuels
- Nuclear power is a bad idea
- We can predict long-term climate changes
- We cannot adapt to climate change

# MOTTE AND BAILEY CASTLE



Men and women have equal rights

“Feminism”

- Psychological sex differences are entirely a social construct
- Women have a right to abortion at any stage of pregnancy
- Traditional masculinity is toxic
- Western civilization remains a patriarchy

# MOTTE AND BAILEY CASTLE



Some (DSD) babies are born with anomalous sex organs.

“Sex is a social construct”

- Doctors and midwives *assign* sex, rather than reporting it.
- Sex is a spectrum.
- The sex of a person is whatever they identify as.



# Strict vs. customary meaning

- Many terms have a strict, “correct” or literal meaning, but also are commonly used with a different meaning, leading to ambiguity.
- E.g. “minimal” literally means “as small as possible”, but is often used to mean “an insignificant amount”.
- “Inconclusive” technically means “not conclusive”, i.e. tells us nothing *for certain*, but often means “tells us nothing useful”.

- “I don’t believe X” is often used to mean “I believe that X is not the case”.
- *Literally*, it just means that I don’t believe that X is the case.

(For example, I might have no idea about X.)

“The evidence for global warming is *inconclusive*”

“Studies show that helmet laws are *completely unnecessary* for safe cycling”

“We have implemented strategies to *minimise* the run-off of pollutants”

“The amount of pollution is *minimal*”

“We have *no intention* of introducing a harmonised sales tax”

“I *don't believe* that CAGW is real”

NIST (who investigated the building collapses on 9/11) were criticized by some engineers who suggested that explosives must have been used. NIST's response:

“Finally, NIST has stated that it found no corroborating evidence to suggest that explosives were used to bring down the buildings. NIST did not conduct tests for explosive residue and as noted above, such tests would not necessarily have been conclusive.”

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“The evidence that I made this mess is not necessarily conclusive.”

# Prof. Hauser responds ...

- In 2012, the Office of Research Integrity of the National Institutes of Health found that Prof. Marc Hauser was guilty of scientific misconduct. They concluded that he fabricated data, manipulated results in multiple experiments, and conducted experiments in factually incorrect ways. The investigation into Hauser was prompted by allegations of data fabrication by his former graduate students.

“I acknowledge that I made mistakes. I let important details get away from my control, and as head of the lab, I take responsibility for all errors made within the lab, whether or not I was directly involved.”

- We previously discussed the anomaly of (apparent) molten iron or steel pouring out of one corner of the South Tower shortly before collapse.
  - NIST identified this as molten aluminum, mixed with burning organic materials so it *looked* like molten iron.
  - But, according to engineers on site, molten iron was also found, after the collapses, in the rubble pile.



WTC 2

A steel spill in  
Scunthorpe





“The condition of the steel in the wreckage of the WTC towers (i.e., whether it was in a molten state or not) was irrelevant to the investigation of the collapse since it does not provide any conclusive information on the condition of the steel when the WTC towers were standing.” (NIST)

“The condition of the steel in the wreckage of the WTC towers (i.e., **whether it was in a molten state or not**) was irrelevant to the investigation of the collapse since it does not provide any conclusive information on the condition of the steel when the WTC towers were standing.” (NIST)

Note the use of a conditional here, to avoid acknowledging that a lot of molten steel was indeed found, according to many qualified people.

“The condition of the steel in the wreckage of the WTC towers (i.e., whether it was in a molten state or not) was irrelevant to the investigation of the collapse since it does not provide any conclusive information on the condition of the steel when the WTC towers were standing.”

C.f. “Car seat belts are irrelevant to road safety because they don’t provide any total protection against traumatic injury.”

# Part 4

Jargon, connotation, euphemisms, weasel words

# Intimidating Jargon

- Technical jargon is useful, to allow experts to communicate with each other precisely and efficiently.
- However, be wary when such jargon is used in communicating with the public. It can be used to intimidate people, to make them think their sense of what's going on is worthless.

# “conversation with an engineer”



# Connotation

- In addition to the strict meaning, words carry *connotation*, including emotional associations, and evaluation.

For example, the following statements mean roughly the same thing, but the connotations are very different.

“Smith’s salary is *higher than is typical*”

“Smith’s salary is *generous*”

“Smith’s salary is *bloated*”

# Same or different?

- Are you *stubborn* or *determined*?
- Are you *pro-life* or *anti-choice*?
- Are you a *cripple* or *a person with a disability*?
- *plus size* or *fat*?
- *single-minded* or *obsessed*?
- Do we *kill* our enemies or *neutralize* them?
- *Gender-affirming care* or *genital mutilation*?



# Realtor speak ...



## Do a realtor's edit ...

(ii) *Just Listed!!!* Cramped, two-bedroom condo right in the noisy centre of Kits. Beach rather a long walk away. Small kitchen with old appliances. Fir floors are dented and scratched. Dim northern exposure. Draughty. Tiny balcony with no roof.

- In the following passage, underline each term or phrase that has a positive connotation. Suggest replacements that have either neutral or negative connotation, writing them above the original words or phrases.

(i) You should hire me because I am single-minded, determined, and have years of experience. Working as a sales associate I was recognised among my colleagues for clear, honest communication, confidence, and being proactive. I am a natural leader, great with details, and willing to help others find and correct their mistakes.

(i) You should hire me because I am single-minded, determined, and have years of experience. Working as a sales associate I was recognised among my colleagues for clear, honest communication, confidence, and being proactive. I am a natural leader, great with details, and willing to help others find and correct their mistakes.

(i) You should hire me because I am single-minded (**obsessive**), determined (**stubborn**), and have years of experience (**old**). Working as a sales associate (**store clerk**) I was recognised (**notorious**) among my colleagues for clear (**blunt**), honest (**insensitive**) communication, confidence (**arrogance**), and being proactive (**aggressive**). I am a natural leader (**bossy**), great with details (**nit picking**), and willing to help others find and correct their mistakes (**love to criticise other people**).

# Euphemisms

- Euphemisms are words that describe bad things in a way that makes them sound ok.
- E.g. Smith *passed*, rather than “died”.
- “Here in the USA we don’t torture people. Occasionally we may use *enhanced interrogation techniques*.”

Is it wrong to use euphemisms?

# Connotation changes with *use*

- Why are past scientific terms, like “idiot”, “imbecile”, “retarded” and “moron” now unacceptable?
- George Carlin: “There’s no shame attached to the word ‘cripple’? It’s in the Bible.”
- People say I should be nicer. But, you know, “nice” is derived from the Latin *nescius*, which means “ignorant”.

# Weasel Words

- So-called “weasel words” are ones like “possibly”, “perhaps”, “might”, “this suggests”, “it appears”, “it seems”, “up to”, etc.
- We tend to skip over such words, as meaningless filler. E.g. we read:  
“If you clean my room for me then I might give you five dollars” as  
“If you clean my room for me then I will give you five dollars”



- Later on, of course, the person who used the weasel words can insist on the literal meaning of what they said. (I.e. almost no meaning at all.)

E.g. “I only said I *might* give you five dollars.”

“I only said I *seem* to be a doctor. I didn’t actually claim to *be* one.”

# Weasel Words

- A sentence with weasel words has a lot less meaning than it appears to. Weasel words:
    - “... suck the life out of the words next to them, just as a weasel sucks the egg and leaves the shell”
    - “The reserve of modern assertions is sometimes pushed to extremes, in which the fear of being contradicted leads the writer to strip himself of almost all sense and meaning.”
- [Winston Churchill, quoted in Wikipedia]

- “Everything up to 75% off”
- “If you don’t take these supplements, you may be at risk of stroke, osteoporosis and dementia.”

All Items\*

\$1

\*Excludes seasonal items. Select items only.

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# Cherry-picked comparisons

A: This coffee is pretty bad.

B: Actually I think it's better than most of the coffee served in English cafés.

“Canada’s defense spending is totally pathetic. We spend only 1.2% of our GDP on defense, compared to the USA which spends 3.5%!”



# More comparisons

		Spending (US\$ bn) ◆	% of GDP ◆
11	 Ukraine	44.0	34
12	 Italy	33.5	1.7
13	 Australia	32.3	1.9
14	 Canada	26.9	1.2
15	 Israel	23.4	4.5
16	 Spain	20.3	1.5
17	 Brazil	20.2	1.1