

Linguistics #1: Dictionaries, Spooner, Recency



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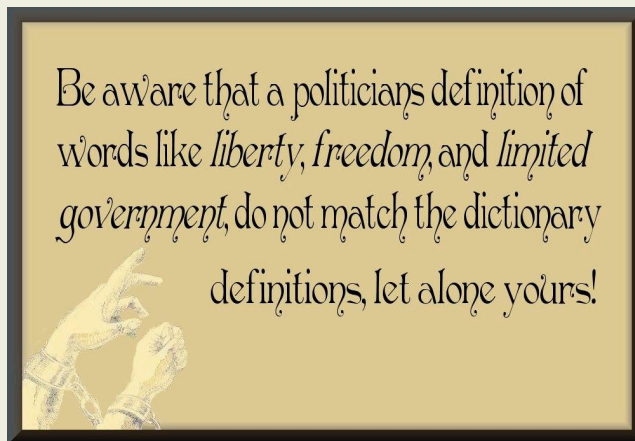
"Finding the Challenges" is an original column appearing every other Wednesday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Verbal Vol. Verbal is a software engineer, college professor, corporate information officer, life long student, farmer, libertarian, literarian, student of computer science and self-ordering phenomena. Archived columns can be found [here](#). FTC-only RSS feed available [here](#).

Although each of my columns deals with linguistics, I have decided to take a more direct tack — I am launching a series that will, somewhat regularly, explore specifics of the symbolic process by which we think and communicate, the specifics of language. Rest assured, however, that I will not bother you with "grammar police" sorts of matters. I am exploring the areas in which people and their language work against themselves in achieving realistic goals.

The first topic below, captioned "Linguistics #1" is a sample of how I will riff directly on the function of information processing in culture. But a discerning eye will pick out indirect allusions to the same topic in the Spooner section and in the Fallacy section.

I come from a very rich literary tradition, which means I was inundated in a certain linguistic heritage from day one. I am the product of the rural South as well as the "Hub of the Universe" (the somewhat grandiose label that was pasted on Boston in colonial times when it was THE major city in the British North American landfalls). My mother was a Boston Latin grad, and a college English major, while my father was a self-taught linguist via the pages of a translation of the *Thousand and One Arabian Nights (the Tales of Scheherazade)*, and a civil engineer from the University of Kentucky. I was steeped in an Appalachian worldview. My first college degree was also attained in the English major, even though I had done three years as an Engineering hopeful. I have impeccable credentials to be the unique thinker, speaker, writer, actor, and student that I am.

Dictionaries — Linguistics #1



Posted by libertarian friend, Jeff Smith, in Another 2000+ Libertarian Quotes, on Sunday, March 8, 2015.

I very much agree, but I also feel that this is just the tip of the iceberg. The politicians are more likely to match the dictionary than I am. The dictionary only reports on the current misconceptions of what words mean (i.e. the perception of political consensus and/or of popular usage). The politicians are going to exploit those misconceptions.

Take, for instance, the word “liberty”:

- Etymology — Etymology Online
- Current dictionary opinions on definitions in usage — One Look

The root (etymology) of the word is mostly clear, whereas the modern proliferation of definitions among competing lexicons has the same effect as the blizzards of legislation and regulations from capitals all over the world. White noise, aural wallpaper.

Politicians in a large sense are the makers of dictionaries. *Die Endlösung* (Final Solution) was added to the stream by Nazi statists, while *Shoah* (The Holocaust) was coined by Jewish victims and their proponents. Both words were metaphoric placeholders for a specific event of genocide. The figurative overlay in both cases sharpens the isolation of the idea, while blurring the understanding that genocide is a longstanding failure of our species, deepened by our tendency to gloss over what we choose to forget.

Spooner Quote #14

Majorities, as such, afford no guarantees for justice. They are men of the same nature as minorities. They have the same passions for fame, power, and money, as minorities; and are liable and likely to be equally — perhaps more than equally, because more boldly — rapacious, tyrannical and unprincipled, if entrusted with power. There

is no more reason, then, why a man should either sustain, or submit to, the rule of the majority, than of a minority.

This is where Lysander Spooner puts the lie to the flagrant misunderstanding that there is available any process to homogenize the wishes of groups of people. Democracy is actually a means for leaving people and groups of people holding the bag, marginalizing second thoughts. Entrusting decisions to majorities is too crude to be called a “meat ax” approach. Not just the minority is disenfranchised by majority rule, but so are members of the majority who have doubts and want follow-through, as well as members of the majority who gain later access to knowledge that was previously obscured. Belabor the process further with “representative” institutions, and voter apathy, and then all public decisions are made by oligarchies of various sizes. Although the dramatizing on the TV show, “Criminal Minds,” may not be wholly realistic, how many days out of a hundred days do you suspect that such encapsulated units are held to any true accountability or even rough outside knowledge shedding light on what they are doing? Are they chosen and assigned by any meaningful, cogent majority?

Logic Fallacy #23 — Recency

A problem that we see with dictionaries, but even more so in the media, is the logic fallacy that subsequent information supersedes older information. In part this is due to physical limitations upon either form of information transfer. With the news gatherers there are time constraints, whereas the dictionary people have space, relevancy, and cost constraints (the deadly triad, time/cost/quality, where only two points can be optimized).

You have probably seen this phenomenon in news reportage where, for instance, a plane may crash but the first reports are very scanty and often wrong — in order to connect to common knowledge, reporters will often speculate about connections beyond anything that is known (terrorists may have brought the plane down?). As the story develops it either drops out of the news cycle before having been fully reported or facts begin to emerge. In any event, media consumers are left with the impression that new news is better. This impression, of course, redounds to the benefit of media, so they have no particular interest in countering it.

We have a similar impression that a new dictionary is better than an old dictionary, not without sound reason (both *pro* and *con*). But this process tends to unlink our languages from their foundations. The purpose of a dictionary should be to increase precision in use of the language. I mean, after all, language is the indispensable base for both thought and communication. It seems to me likely that someday we will have dictionaries that put the definition of “cool” as “1. hip, with it, witty, and urbane; 2. having a relatively lower caloric content; ... “

Speaking of coolness, the latest and greatest is “where it’s at!” The consequences, however, are to be culturally severed from the recognition of consequences. We tend to experience arguments such as “I was not alive during the Nixon years, so they are irrelevant to me,” or “I was taught in school that FDR was one of our greatest presidents, so I would rather not disturb the crust of old accumulated misinformation there, I can allocate no critical thinking resources to that false monument.”

Think about it. Why would certain politicians repeat lies that have been thoroughly debunked? They do it because there will be some element of the audience who mistake it for new information, thus more informative than any older, perhaps more true, information. The logic fallacy of recency can be very expensive if not deadly.

You too have impeccable credentials to be the unique thinker, speaker, writer, actor, and student that you are. But this is not an excuse, it is a challenge. How will one voluntarily process the language that shapes one’s uniqueness. Will you be clay in the hands of others, or will you be the chooser of the clay and the shaper of the vessel?

Read more from “Finding the Challenges”: