

Wor(l)ds in Common: How Language Shapes News, Bias, and Reality

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Third Age Learning – Kitchener-Waterloo

Sophocles

(497-405 BCE)

“Language, and thought like the wind

And the feelings that make the town

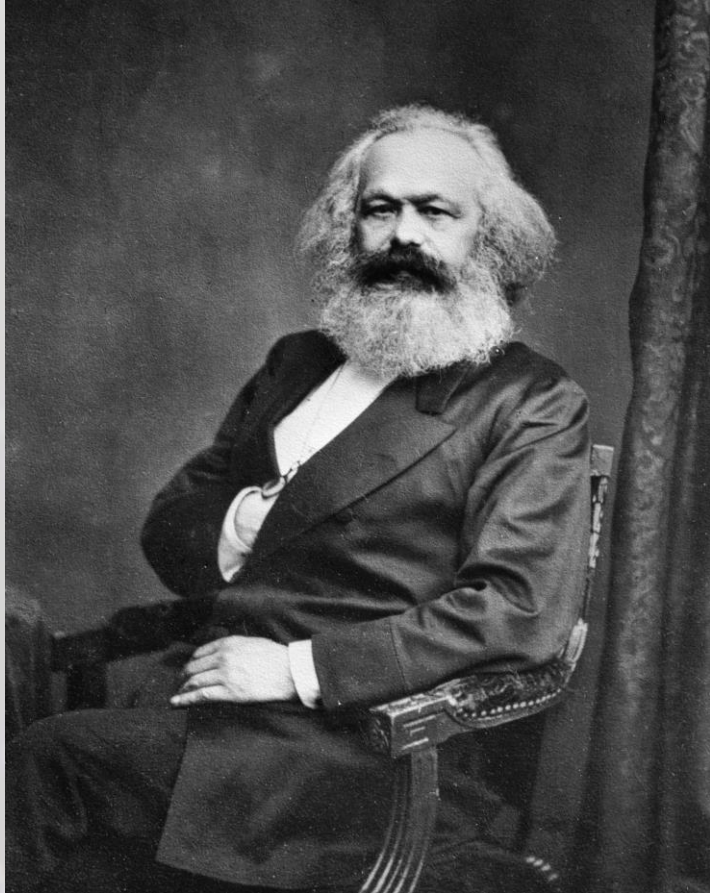
Man has taught himself, and shelter against the cold,

Refuge from the rain.”

Antigone (442 BCE)

Painting by Sebastien Norblin, 1825 CE, Paris, Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts adapted by VladoubidoOo published on 05 April 2018 (CC)





“A spider conducts operations which resemble those of the weaver, and a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax.”

Karl Marx (1818-1883)

Misconceptions about Communication

- (1) Meanings are contained in words
- (2) Communication is a verbal process
- (3) Telling is communicating

James C. McCroskey (1936-2012)

NB: "Le Mur des Je t'aime" (the Wall of Love) (Guilhem Veut) ►



You should never say
bad things about the dead,
you should **only say good...**
Joan Crawford is dead. Good.

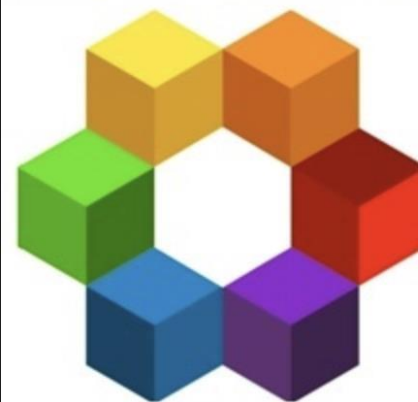
– Bette Davis



1. Reflective: Language reflects meaning

- science: referred to as a “nomenclature”
- “folk theories” of language = words just mean what they mean
- words are just words - “mere rhetoric”

I U P A C



Prefix(es)

+

infix

+

Root Word

+

1st Suffix

+

2nd Suffix

} Base Name



Humpty Dumpty
From "Through the Looking Glass"
By Sir John Tenniel

By permission of
Messrs. Macmillan and Co.

AJ Dec 1901

allowed, not the
remarkable faculty
Sir John. They
the existence of a
of human interest
artistic impulse,
could not be explained
without a much

2. Intentional: What author or speaker intends

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master — that's all."

— Lewis Carroll (1871) Through the Looking Glass

— Lewis Carroll (1832-1898)

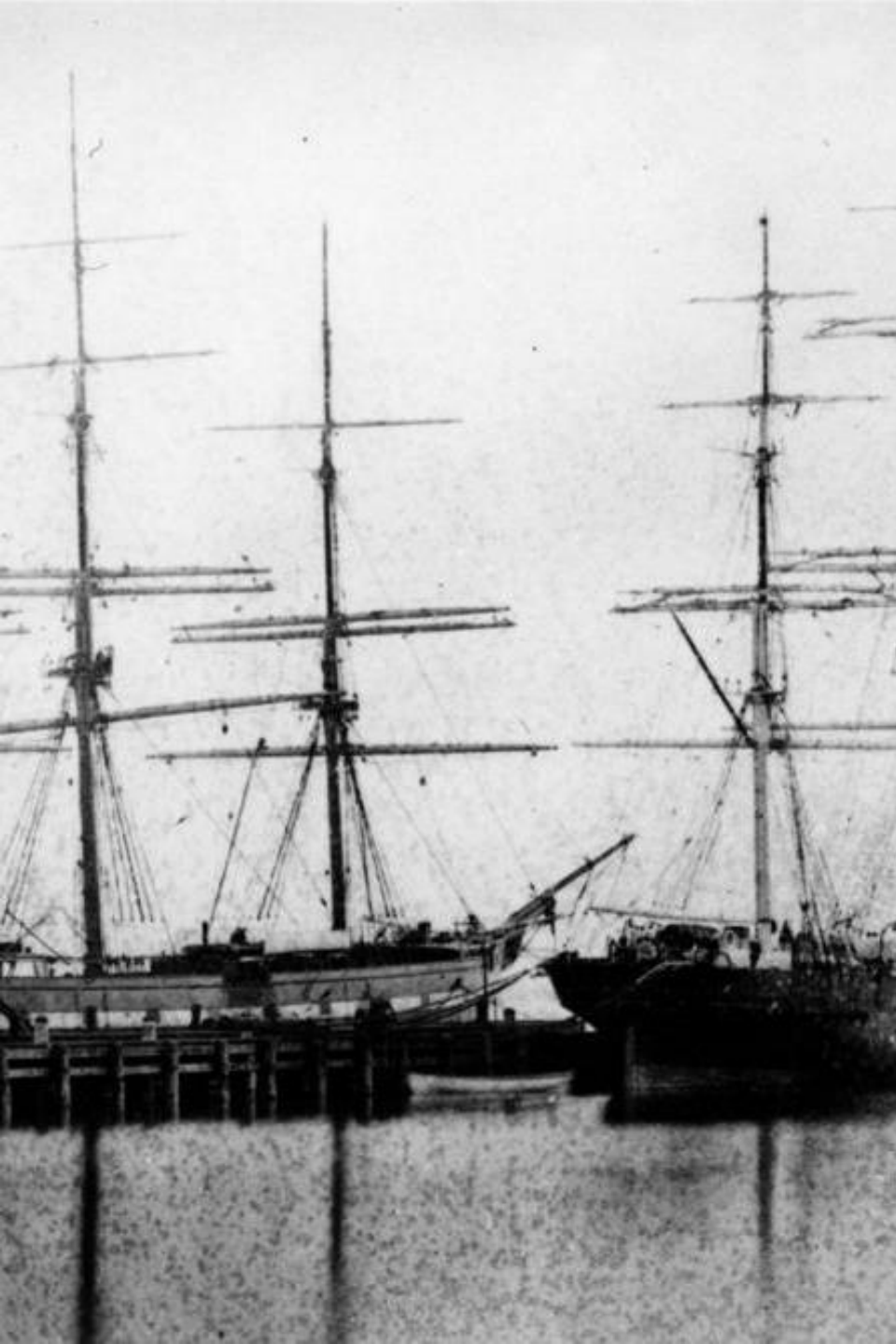
3. Constructionist: language is social = it “constructs” reality

- reality is NOT “made up”
- word choices, structures, connotations etc = create a perception of object/etc
- “our perception” = “our reality”

Example:

- Police officer chatted with the teenager.
- Police officer spoke to the teenager.
- Police officer interrogated the teenager.





“Communication”: Historical trajectory of a keyword

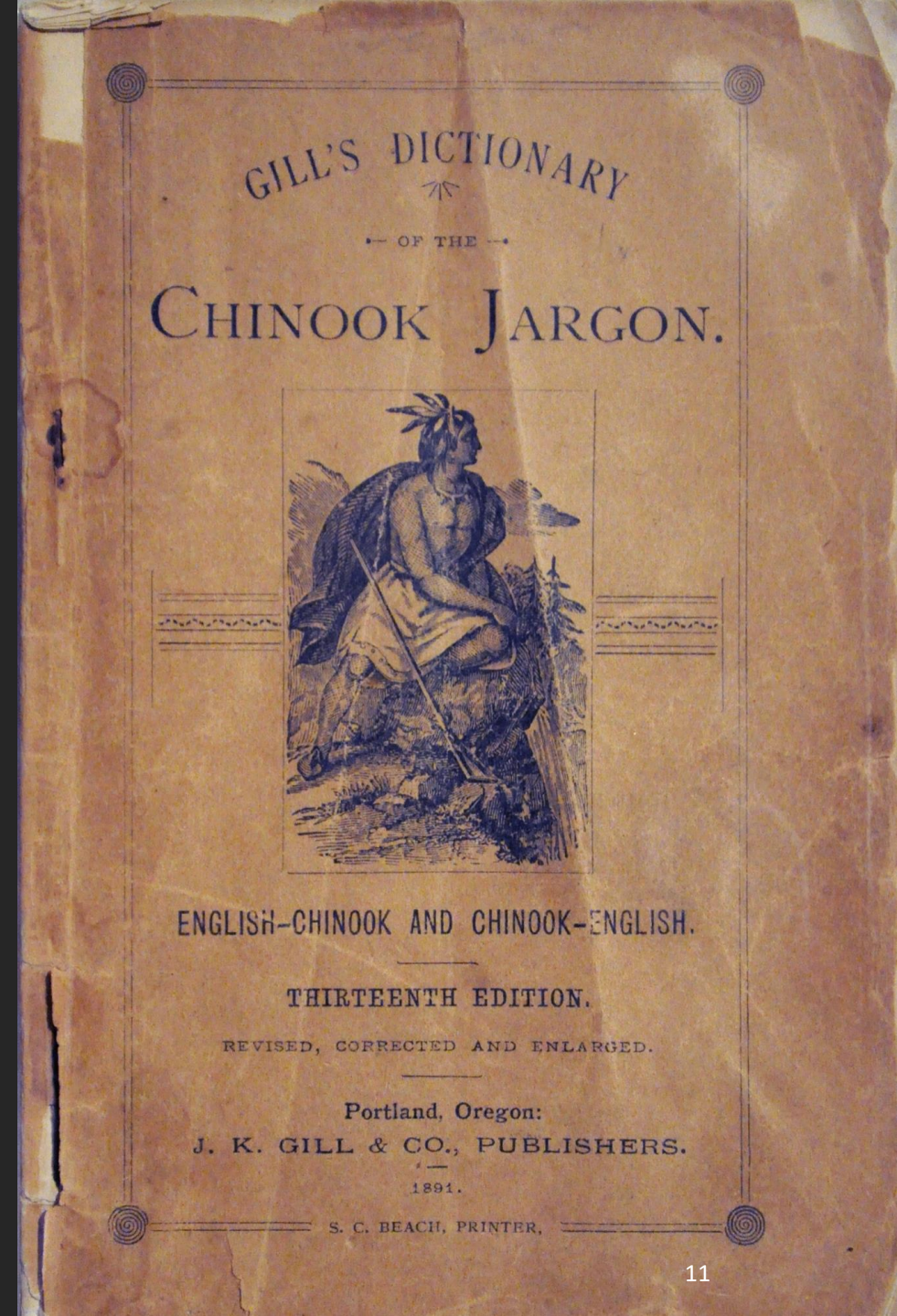
- early 1400s CE (Latin) ‘a noun of action’ (via communicare)
- late 1400s: ‘object thus made common’: ‘a communication’
- late 1600s: ‘lines of communication’ [ships, canals, roads etc]
- 20thC: (a) ‘passing information & maintaining social contact’ → (b) to refer to such media (e.g. press, broadcasting)

- Opposite ends of spectrum of meanings:
 - ‘transmit’ = ‘one-way process’
 - ‘share’ = ‘a common or mutual process’

Language = Common(s)

- Since language mediates concepts, reality, objects between members of a culture ...
- Therefore, 'to represent & exchange meanings & concepts, we must share a language'
- a common language 'allows us to correlate our concepts & ideas w certain written words, spoken sounds or visual images ('signs')

(Stuart Hall 1997: 18)



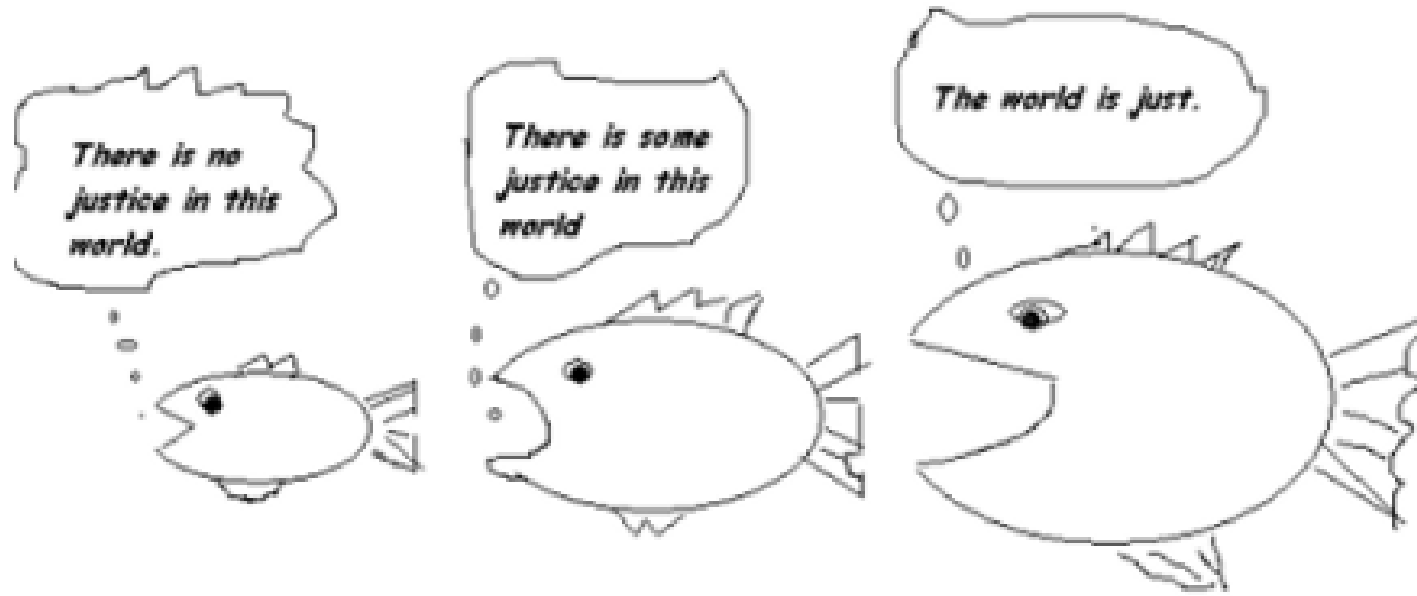
“The British and Americans are two people separated by a common language.” Winston Churchill (1874-1965)

Same words, different meanings:

- pants
- bonnet
- bog
- chips
- trainer(s)

Words are shared socially in common with everyone who lives within a community.





“Framing”
creates “reality”:
How one sees
the world
depends upon
their situation

Words change the frame: 'Rats Bite Infant'

[Version 1]

An infant left sleeping in his crib was bitten repeatedly by rats while his 16-year-old mother went to cash her welfare cheque. A neighbor responded to the cries of the infant and brought the child to Central Hospital where he was treated and released in his mother's custody. The mother, Angie Burns of the South End, explained softly, "I was only gone five minutes. I left the door open so my neighbour would hear him if he woke up. I never thought this would happen in the daylight."

[Version 2]

An eight-month old infant was bitten repeatedly by rats in the middle of the day, while his 16-year-old mother was out buying baby formula and diapers. The infant was taken to Central Hospital by Liam Longman, a neighbor who was looking after the infant. Burns is the latest victim of a rat epidemic plaguing inner-city neighbourhoods labeled the "Zone of Death." Health officials say infant mortality rates in these neighborhoods approach those in many third world countries.

Words enable abstract thought via Metaphors

Metaphor is an “implied comparison achieved through a **figurative** use of words; the words are used not in their **literal** sense, but in one analogous to it”

EXAMPLE:

“From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent.”

Winston Churchill (1874-1965) in speech at Fulton, Missouri, 6 March 1946)

- sets things 'before the eyes' (Aristotle)

- 'illustrate the abstract'

- **generative potential**: e.g. 'vivid metaphors'

- 'dead metaphors' or clichés

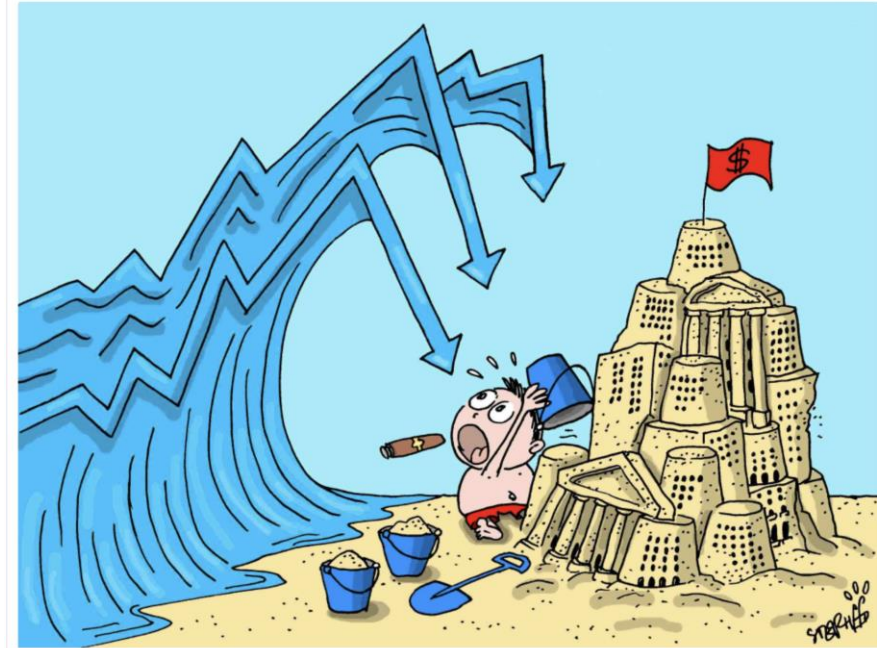
- 'serve a pedagogical function'

(Duerringer 2019: 9)



FINANCIAL TSUNAMI

OCT
24
2008



by Stephane Peray
courtesy of Paula Pastorek, Inc.

Financial Crisis 2008: Politics of Metaphors

What is left out?

What is in?



**WHY IS IT
EASIER TO BELIEVE THAT
150,000,000 AMERICANS
ARE BEING LAZY
RATHER THAN
400 AMERICANS
ARE BEING GREEDY**



OCCUPY

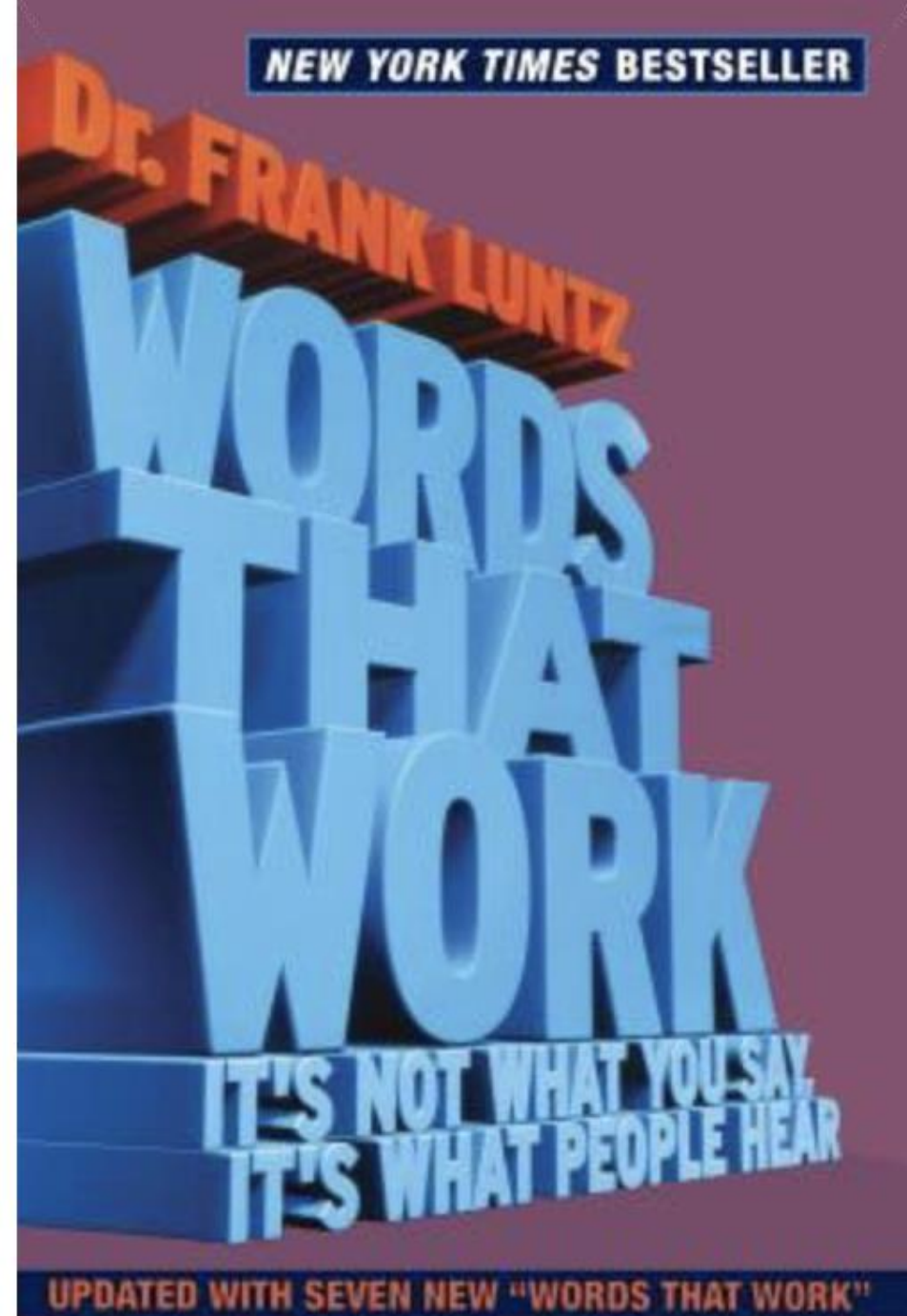
Occupy* Posters owsposters.tumblr.com

A screenshot of a Business Insider article. At the top, there is a navigation bar with a menu icon, a search icon, the Business Insider logo, and a blue "Subscribe" button. Below the navigation bar, the word "RETAIL" is displayed in blue. The main headline reads: "Panera founder says employees today aren't motivated by the idea of making money for shareholders: 'Nobody cares'". Below the headline, the author's name "Kylie Kirschner" and the date "Dec 11, 2023, 4:15 AM ET" are shown. There is a share icon and a "Download the app" button. At the bottom of the article preview, there is a photograph of a man in a blue Panera shirt standing next to a sign that says "WELCOME TO Panera cares". The sign also includes the text "the non-profit community org of shared responsibility" and "What is a Panera Cares' Cafe?".

Dr. Frank Luntz (2009) Five of 10 Frames to Respond to Occupy Wall Street

- Don't say 'capitalism'. Use 'free market' or 'economic freedom'
- Don't say Gov't 'taxes the rich'. Instead, say: Gov't 'takes from the rich'.
- Republicans forget winning battle over the 'middle class'. USE 'hardworking taxpayers'.
- Don't talk about 'jobs'. Talk about 'careers'.
- Don't say 'government spending'. Call it 'waste'.

Source: 'Corporate Right Taught How to Talk about Occupy' (yahoo news)



Conceptual Metaphors

- 'structure perception, thought and action in the world'

e.g. 'argument-is-war' = 'win or lose'

→ a retreat, on the offensive, advancing, etc

→ negative impact on democratic processes?

e.g. 'nation as container':

(a) "Seal the border"

(b) "Stop immigrants pouring in"



M E T A P H O R S
W E L I V E B Y

GEORGE LAKOFF
AND MARK JOHNSON



What is 'News'?

- accidents? unforeseen events?
- 'random reactions to random events'? (Graham Murdock)

'... the report or account of recent events or occurrences, brought to or coming to one as new information; new occurrences as a subject of a report or talk.'

(emphasis added,
Oxford English Dictionary)

HURRICANE MILTON

Meteorologists Get Death Threats as Hurricane Milton Conspiracy Theories Thrive

It's their job to warn residents about destructive storms — but political polarization has made them targets online

BY LORENA O'NEIL

OCTOBER 9, 2024

Billionaires made \$3.9 trillion during the pandemic — enough to pay for everyone's vaccine

Juliana Kaplan Jan 26, 2021, 8:30 AM



Economics

Covid-19 has cost global workers \$3.7tn in lost earnings, says ILO

Women and young workers bear brunt of job losses and reductions in hours, says UN labour body



‘The News Dilemma’?

“Early in life I have noticed that no event is ever correctly reported in a newspaper, but in Spain, for the first time, I saw newspaper reports which did not bear any relation to the facts, not even the relationship which is implied in an ordinary lie...”

George Orwell (1938) Homage to Catalonia

5

JOURNALISTIC TECHNIQUES THAT MAY OBFUSCATE RATHER THAN ILLUMINATE SOURCES

KEY POINTS

- Readers say they want only the facts, but in practice they demand context for stories.
- Editors and journalistic standards ensure truthfulness at reputable publications.
- Reputable publications correct their errors promptly and prominently.

1920s: News emerges as an 'Authoritative Discourse'

- 'Authority' of editors & journalists to condense, summarize & edit numerous reports into own words
- rewrite in 'a concise and unadorned style' & provide context
e.g. tabloids: 8 yrs; broadsheets: 13 yrs
- Paragraph = 1-2 sentences, 30 words, one idea each
- 'intro' sentence = summarizes topic
- lead P: reporters: 'prerogative to assert something about the larger political meaning of the message'
- distinctive news 'voice' or style emerges

(Matheson 2000: 564-565)



KTLA 
@KTLA

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#BREAKING: A Metro Rail train has derailed after striking a vehicle in East L.A.



1:04 p.m. · 18 Sep 24 · **533K** Views

153 Reposts **92** Quotes **1,091** Likes



Most relevant replies 



IC3BOY  @exsdys · 18h 

Replying to @KTLA

the car hit the train why did you word it in passive tense and insinuate the train was at fault for being rammed into? dumba** reporting at KTLA

 4

 12

 1.1K

 8.1K



Post your reply



News: Can you trust it?

'It's Official: Watching Fox Makes You Stupider' (The Nation 2012)

'British Public Wrong About Nearly Everything, Survey Shows' (The Independent, July 2013)

Image: Screenshot of Yorkshire Newsagent shared on "X" (formerly Twitter 11 October 2024)

