# Controlling Thought

**by Theodore Dalrymple**

| Word | Moving towards | Moving away | Shift start | Source |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| gay | homosexual, lesbian | happy, showy | ca 1920 | (Kulkarni et al., 2014) |
| fatal | illness, lethal | fate, inevitable | <1800 | (Jatowt and Duh, 2014) |
| awful | disgusting, mess | impressive, majestic | <1800 | (Simpson et al., 1989) |
| nice | pleasant, lovely | refined, dainty | ca 1900 | (Wijaya and Yeniterzi, 2011) |
| broadcast | transmit, radio | scatter, seed | ca 1920 | (Jeffers and Lehiste, 1979) |
| monitor | display, screen | — | ca 1930 | (Simpson et al., 1989) |
| record | tape, album | — | ca 1920 | (Kulkarni et al., 2014) |
| guy | fellow, man | — | ca 1850 | (Wijaya and Yeniterzi, 2011) |
| call | phone, message | — | ca 1890 | (Simpson et al., 1989) |

**Too great attention** to the use of language is a distraction from the essential and easily becomes mere pedantry; but to pay too little is to risk being deceived or manipulated by those who use language wrongly. Words, Aristotle said, should not bear more precision than possible; but neither should they bear less than possible.

Words have connotations as well as denotations, and one way of insinuating an untruth into someone’s mind is to disconnect the two, so that the denotation and the connotation are at variance and even opposite. An excellent example of this is in the use of the word *austerity* as applied to certain government economic policies. Frequently one reads, for example, that the difficulties of countries such as Britain and France in the matter of responding to the Covid-19 epidemic were caused by previous government *austerity*, that is to say, failure to spend more. But irrespective of whether, had the governments spent more (and France already devotes a greater proportion of its GDP to healthcare than the great majority of countries at the same economic level), the epidemic would have been more easily mastered, their policies in restricting their expenditure cannot be called *austerity*, because they still spent more than their income: as, in fact, they had done almost continually for forty years.

Supposing I were to say, “This year I’m going in for austerity. Last year I spent ten per cent more than my income, but this year I am going to spend only five per cent more,” you would think I were uttering a sub-Wildean paradox. But if I were to say only, “This year I’m going in for austerity,” you would think I were going to wear a hair shirt and subsist on locusts and honey. To say that the British and French governments have exercised austerity is to mean the first and imply the second, which is clearly dishonest: though we should note that the proper term, *reduction of the deficit*, is neutral as to whether it is economically wise or unwise. After all, I can borrow equally to start a business or drink champagne for breakfast.

Another sinister and increasingly common confusion which I see both in British and French newspapers is that between refutation and denial. A man accused of something, either by the law or a political opponent, says “I refute that charge,” and is duly reported in the newspapers as having refuted it. But of course he hasn’t refuted it, he has denied it, which is only the same thing when everyone is deemed to have his own “validity” or “truth,” which is to say when the epistemology of egocentricity and inflamed individualism is prevalent. I can deny by mere assertion but I cannot refute by mere assertion; and the fact that the confusion is motivated is demonstrated by the fact that, while people mistake denial for refutation, no one ever mistakes refutation for denial. The word *refutation* has connotations of disproof that any guilty person would delight to attach to his false denial.

*The mills of linguistic reform grind exceeding small.*

Semantic shifts are, or at least can be, important. For example, the word *unhappy* has been almost expunged from the lexicon in favour of *depressed*. This is important because it implies a) that happiness is the normal human state of mind and that b) deviation from it is an illness which a doctor

can, or at least ought to be able, to treat, thereby reducing life to a technical problem, in the present state of urban mythology that of balancing the neurotransmitters in the brain.

Changes in usage and semantics, when imposed, are usually exercises in power. These days, pressure for their adoption, like censorship, comes not from government but from pressure groups, small but well-organised and determined. Resistance in small things to monomania not being worth the effort among the better balance, the changes first go by default and then become habitual.

I have noticed an interesting difference in the linguistic demands of ardent feminists in Britain and France. In England, for example, it is now quite wrong for a right-thinking person to use the word *actress* in reference to a female who acts on stage or screen: she is an *actor* and not an *actress*. Thus, Sarah Bernhardt was a famous actor of the later 19th century, as Mrs. Siddons (or should I say Ms Siddons?) was in the previous century.

Recently I saw in a newspaper local to my home in England that a village nearby has the oldest postmaster in the country, who had worked for the Post Office in the village for sixty years and was now ninety-two. The postmaster was actually a woman who, until a few years ago, would have been referred to as the postmistress. In the article she was also referred to as Ms. White rather than Miss or Mrs. The mills of linguistic reform grind exceeding small.

In France, by contrast, it is now necessary to call a French female writer an *écrivaine*, the female form of *écrivain*, and increasingly the masculine form of a word is not allowed to stand for both male and female.

What is interesting about this difference is that, on neither side of the Channel were words such as *actress* and

*postmistress* on the one hand, and *écrivain* as applied to a woman terms of disrespect. It is true that in my adolescence, the first risqué joke I knew was to add “As the actress said to the bishop” to anything than anybody said, which automatically lent it a slightly salacious tone that caused me to giggle: but it was no more respectful of bishops than it was of actresses, and was surely very innocent. To say of Margaret Rutherford that she was an actress had no connotation of disrespect.

As for the word *postmistress*, it conjured up someone who was at the centre of village affairs and might have been a gossip, but who was regarded with both respect and affection.

I need hardly say the word *écrivain* conjures no disrespect in France, on the contrary: for no country has (or at any rate used to have) greater respect for its writers than France. How, then, are we to explain the difference between the two countries? The words *actress*, *postmistress* and *écrivain* are not inherently derogatory. Thus, the demand that they should be replaced is a small, and small-minded, exercise in power—as Humpty Dumpty would say, that’s all.

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