

The Language of Violence

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Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way, but it is generally assumed that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it. Our civilization is decadent and our language -- so the argument runs -- must inevitably share in the general collapse. It follows that any struggle against the abuse of language is a sentimental archaism, like preferring candles to electric light or hansom cabs to aeroplanes. Underneath this lies the half-conscious belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes.

George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," 1946

Introduction

If, as Orwell suggests in the passage above, language is an instrument which we shape for our own purposes, it may serve us well to examine the major contexts in which we employ the language of violence and conflict.

I want to divide my investigation into three separate areas. Here they are in a nutshell:

- (1) What is the language of violence in the field of combat?
- (2) What is the language of violence in the public sphere?
- (3) How does the language of violence emerge in our ordinary lives, especially in sports?

I do not approach this topic from an experts stance or even as one who has amassed a deal of experiential background in these areas. I have never been a soldier or a peace officer, though my father was a career military man (engineers). I approach this area as a philosopher, bringing to the issue of "the language of violence" a willingness to advance abstract connecting principles with which to understand and process our shared history and social space.

(1) What is the language of violence in the field of combat?

The principle objective of the military forces of a nation is to menace or kill the people judged to be enemies of that nation. The principle objective of the police forces² of a nation is to apprehend people judged to have broken laws, by the use of violent force if necessary. In both of these domains the acceptance by the primary participants of the use of force requires two

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² In the very names "armed forces" and "police forces" the use of the word "force" acknowledges the connection of the personnel to violence, as opposed to other words like "staff" or "faculty" or other group terms. By metaphorical extension we describe organized employees of a company or state as a "workforce" and the currently unemployed as "a reserve army of the unemployed." These latter usages and examples would fall under the section below where I treat language of violence in our ordinary lives.

dynamics which are quite explicable in human terms: (1) the dehumanization of the people toward whom the violence is or may be directed and (2) the renaming of the actual acts of violence in functional ways. Let us look more closely at each of these in turn.

The first of these (the dehumanization of the people toward whom the violence is or may be directed) is so commonplace that it will not have escaped your notice. If you turn your attention to the terms used (collective nouns) to refer to the opponents, one can easily recall that every war has its collection of dismissive epithets for the other. To take only a few of the epithets used by the US in these conflicts:

(World Wars): The Hun, Boche (originally “alboche,” an eliding of “allemande” and “blockhead”), Heinie, Kraut, Jap, Dago, etc

(Asian conflicts): Slant, slope, gook, chink, etc

(Iraq): Towel head, raghead, camel jockey, etc

(police): scumbag, perp, hump, skels, etc

and these are just the more repeatable instances, vulgar sexual and scatological metaphors being extremely common.

All of these terms serve to obscure the fact that it is people one is preparing to inflict violence on. In fact, the targets of violence could more intimately be described as brothers or sisters, fathers or mothers, sons or daughters. But no soldier would refer to the people s/he is targeting in these terms. The whole point of the replacement terms is to avoid recognizing the humanity of the other and the fact that one is prepared to do violence to a person, with the implications that involves.

That reality (of the essential humanity of the persons on the other side whom one intends to kill if possible) may be why, while “yank” and “reb” can be said with a lot of venom, there did not seem to emerge a vocabulary which so distanced the humanity of the participants in our civil war, and I suspect the same is true for the Irish and Iraqi participants in their civil wars. That is, I would hazard that they do not have as dismissive a vocabulary as do combatants in wars in which racial and cultural divides characterize the opponents. When brother literally fights brother, it is not so easy to accomplish the dehumanizing of the opponent, as it comes near to dehumanizing oneself.

If we turn now from the objects of violence to the act of violence itself, we find ourselves surrounded by euphemisms, but not euphemisms designed to obscure the fact that violence has occurred. What people actually do to others in combat are roughly (brutally) these:

shooting

piercing with knife, bayonet, arrow, sword, etc

exploding

choking to death with garotte, poison or hands

drowning

poisoning (with gas or radiation)

setting on fire

I can feel in myself the desire, even as I list these things, to avoid the horror of their direct description, an instinct to cover the simple directness of the words. That is an instinct to which combatants fully give rein. Perhaps only (or mainly) in training scenarios are the above terms commonly used by combatants. The preferred expressions are:

waste
drop
pop
level
grease
take out
wipe out
eliminate
cream
toast
mop up
roll up

and other expressions which serve to insulate the killer from the act of killing. All in all, it would be humanly surprising if this sort of linguistic replacement did not occur.

I won't belabor the point, but using these terms replaces, with a euphemism, a more blunt description of the act of killing someone in one of the brutal ways available to combatants.

It might be worth investigating gang violence and family violence to catalogue similar dynamics (think "take to the woodshed" and "tan his hide" for equivalent family violence replacements). Social scientists in those areas could surely enumerate the spectrum of terms that replace the fundamental fact of beating a child or a spouse. The important thing to note here is that it would be surprising if the same phenomenon of euphemistic language to obscure the brute fact of violence were not present in family violence, gang violence, etc.

(2) What is the language of violence in the public sphere?

Let's now turn to the language of violence as it appears in the public sphere. Without a doubt we can trace the two dynamics mentioned earlier dehumanization and the replacement of direct descriptors by euphemistic equivalents. Let's unpack the commonalities and differences between the two domains (the public sphere and the field of combat).

While the racial and ethnic slurs which are common in the field of combat (and which I argued above serve to distance the awareness of the combatant from the humanity of the opponent in order to make it possible to accept killing him), the language of the public sphere is more complex. Take any one of the terms identified from particular wars above as being current on the battlefield and hardly a one would appear in public print as acceptable terms for opponents³. "Kraut" and "Jap" are the sole exceptions, I think. But the same function of diverting attention from the essential humanity of the people toward whom violence is being directed is apparent.

Here is a partial list of terms in the public sphere to refer to our opponents when simple national identity won't do:

Terrorists
(Fundamentalist) Extremists

³ By "public print" I mean the newspapers of the time and the military and congressional reports of conflicts which make up the public record then or at a later time of the events in question.

Seditionists
Rebels
(Godless) Communists

These and other such terms perform the role of the distancing of humanity, but they also are designed for other purposes. These terms have persuasive power to legitimate the directors of violence (the military bureaucracy and the legitimators of directed violence--the civilian government and the people of a state) to feel comfortable with the human destruction for which they are opting. These terms are designed to convince us that our role in state-sponsored violence is justified. It suggests that those toward whom we direct our violence are either irrational (and thus diplomacy or persuasion are impossible) or have objectives ("the destruction of our way of life") or position themselves so implacably against duly constituted authority that they must be militarily opposed in a "just" war.

Note that the heart of the terms used for the "enemy" on the battlefield arise primarily from the racial, ethnic or personal⁴ otherness of the opponent, while those in the public sphere stress ideological or political otherness. Thus while there is a functional link between the terms used in these two areas, there are also important differences in role. There is no place for the *persuasive* or the *justificatory* on the battlefield; these are done deals. The situation on the battlefield is understood to be "kill or be killed,"⁵ and the appropriateness of conflict is not supposed to be an issue for the in-place combatant. The requirement at the point of conflict is to reinforce disdain and distance so that violence can be pursued without real threat to the mental health of the soldier, which would be imperiled if the humanity of the opponent were fully absorbed. In the public sphere, on the other hand, the language functions to justify our (or rather, more accurately, or son's and daughter's) killing other people's sons and daughters.

If we now turn to the collection of terms in the public sphere for deliberate violent actions (as distinct from the terms for the opponent himself) we run right into the terrain George Orwell explored so devastatingly in his famous essay "Politics and the English Language." There he described a "catalog of swindles and perversions" which characterized how the government sought to obscure the reality of conflict from its citizens. Recent conflicts can add a lot to just this "obscuring" by the perverse use of the language of violence in the public sphere.

- We no longer use "landmines"; we use "area denial munitions"
- We no longer use "torture", we use "physical persuasion"
- The term "concentration camp" has totally replaced "death camp"
- We don't drop bombs or missiles, we "employ aerial ordnance", and the bombs we used to drop are now referred to as "vertically deployed anti-personnel devices"

⁴The gut-level personal otherness of the opponent may come down to what they eat (as the French and the British calling each other "frogs" and "rosbifs" and both calling the Germans "Krauts") or items of dress as in "raghead" and "towelhead" mentioned above.

⁵This is the presumption, but a more subtle analysis would invoke other possibilities: as opposed to being killed, a combatant can surrender or flee, and in lieu of killing, the combatant can decline the opportunity to engage, can deliberately misdirect the instruments of violence or propose surrender. These are all important personal decisions which are reported with some frequency on the actual field of combat, and their use or abandonment have important moral dimensions.

- In WWII we employed the term Adehousing@ for the allied bombing of German civilian homes
- “Extraordinary rendition” is a relatively new term for delivering “terror suspects” to foreign intelligence services for torture without extradition proceedings.
- What we used to call “mercenary troops” we now call “security contractors”
- We no longer invade...we liberate
- Remember those body bags which used to bother us when so many of them came home in the Vietnam war filled with bodies? They are now referred to as “transfer tubes”
- Our assassins are no longer assigned assassinations they are given "wet work"
- A pre-emptive strike, as you know, is really a US military unprovoked attack
- A “free fire zone” is an area under attack by troops in which the usual rules of engagement are suspended and the napalming and bombing of villages and shooting of journalists, women and children is permitted
- to “neutralize” is to kill or to render politically ineffective by imprisonment, damage to reputation, ideological seduction, etc.
- “shock and awe” emerged in the context of our invasion of Iraq, and is synonymous with massive bombing; this is an example of the military’s new strategy called “effects-based operations” where the desired outcome is concentrated on rather than the action itself Bbut that is probably more than you want to know about the “new” military science.
- “pain compliance”⁶ is the new term for applying violence to make a detained person obey
- The death of human beings, in extraordinary numbers, is encompassed in the neutral phrase Acollateral damage,@ suggesting that if those who died were not deliberately chosen as the target there is no responsibility for that result.

⁶ALEX LEARY & CURTIS KRUEGER, St. Petersburg Times, February 26, 2006: *Most boot camp employees are trained under the defensive tactics component, which in 624 pages spells out how to take down subjects and apply some of the very moves -- hammerlocks, shoulderlocks and pressure points -- barred in other juvenile facilities. Those facilities, which include wilderness camps and standard juvenile detention facilities, follow the more restrictive Protective Action Response policy.*

"Too many youth have been injured in incidents with these techniques," Schembri said in 2004. "While these holds may be appropriate for an adult population, experience has shown us that it is too easy to injure a young person when applying these holds. Physical restraint should be applied only to prevent a youth from hurting himself or others."

His memo disclosing those reforms did not mention that boot camps were not affected.

Juvenile justice officials already have taken steps to create a more uniform policy. A tentative list of changes that surfaced this week bar use of "pain compliance" at boot camps.

Shouldn't I stop? The list is enormous and growing and all of it is carefully designed to depersonalize violence by obscuring its reality either under the blanket of technological terms or the most blatant of euphemisms. The comparison, you will remember, is to combatants' use of terms like "waste," "drop," "level," "grease," etc (see list above) to replace more accurate descriptors for killing people in combat. The gap is huge between the lists, however. The combatants' euphemisms may be crass, but they are direct and unapologetic about the action taken. The bureaucratic euphemisms crafted for the public sphere are indirect and emotionally distancing. They do all they can to deny that the violence of conflict is occurring, suggesting that "areas" are being secured rather than people killed, that violence is being prevented rather than initiated by our actions and that our ends are always just rather than self-serving.

(3) How does the language of violence emerge in our ordinary lives?

In this final section I want to change gears and observe how much our ordinary language is dominated by the language of war, conflict and violence.

Before I settle into my primary field of analysis "the language of violence in sports" I'd like to just bow toward the fact that an immense amount of our ordinary language is almost invisibly saturated with the language of violence. I say "almost invisibly" because we are surely no longer sensitive to the violent imagery behind our speech. Let me just list a number of examples to mark out the field, though I will not give it, at this point, the analysis it deserves:

In the US we fire a person from a job; (in the UK they make a person redundant).

We describe a successful event as a smash hit

Something is to die for

A successful comic says "I killed'em tonight" (before he went on he was urged to "break a leg")

A person or an idea can be striking, and a deal or a compromise can be struck

You can battle a disease, smother a salad in dressing or shoot me an e-mail

As a party game you might want to propose that everyone think of such expressions where we describe common experiences in the language of violence. There will be a ton of them. But why, you may ask should we attend to them? Aren't they innocent metaphors or linguistic devices which should not be taken too seriously? Here is my thesis: The adoption of such violence-oriented expressions are initially less the cause of increased violence in the culture but the symptom or expression of a violent culture. Their continued presence will serve to maintain a casual attitude toward violence and make it more difficult to become a more gentle or pacific culture in the future.

Now before you make up your mind as to whether you want to share my thesis or oppose it, allow me to move to an area where the language of violence really holds sway. I ask you to attend to the area of sports and to follow me into an examination of sports language.

The basic actions of sports.

Teach someone a sport some day and attend to the language in terms of which you ask them to engage. The fundamental act of almost all racket sports is called a shot or a volley, both drawn from the fundamental infantry actions.

You can follow that up by
the bomb in football,
a ground war
the air war
the bullet pass
the blitz
the smash,
the lob,
the quick strike
for team sports, all these are executed by the squad or the unit as in military formations
and the bout between adversaries may be characterized as a battle of the titans

So much for the terminology one encounters when one adopts the descriptive language of sports. But you might want to add to this by imagining for yourself how you would describe the outcomes of games under different circumstances. When the score is lopsided or close or even tied, what would you say? Now listen to radio sportscasters report to their audience the same facts and you will encounter a veritable avalanche of violence.

Here is how, in our culture⁷, we report the amassing of more points by one team (let=s say Xavier) than does another team (shall we say Cornell?)

Xavier crushed Cornell
Xavier beat Cornell
Xavier clobbered Cornell
Xavier annihilated Cornell
Xavier whipped Cornell
Xavier toppled Cornell
Xavier smothered Cornell
Xavier smashed Cornell
Xavier picked off Cornell
Xavier nipped Cornell
Xavier pasted Cornell
Xavier slaughtered Cornell
Xavier rolled over Cornell
Xavier outfought Cornell
Xavier manhandled Cornell
Xavier creamed Cornell
Xavier dueled Cornell to a tie
Xavier battled Cornell to a tie

⁷ It would be interesting to listen to how other nations report their sports scores. The BBC routinely reports the outcome of its football (soccer) contests as follows: AIt was West Ham 2, Arsenal nil; Newcastle 1, Leeds 1...@ etc., though I have heard, with some frequency, the term Abeat@, which I argued above is a violence term, on the BBC for sport score reporting.

Lest you think I am being unfair to the sportscasters for failing to acknowledge that there are expressions they use which are more neutral, I offer these:

Xavier edged Cornell
Xavier dominated Cornell
Xavier lost to Cornell
Xavier outlasted Cornell
Xavier outscored Cornell
Xavier topped Cornell
Xavier breezed past Cornell
Xavier played Cornell to a tie

I am happy to acknowledge these more neutral expressions, however, because they point us to the very important fact that the violent-expressions list is not as full as it is because it is **inevitable** that we use those expressions...there are plenty of non-violent alternatives for recording the same fact, as this later list reveals.

While it may seem inevitable that sports adopt the language of war or conflict, it is not. Some sports, I'll take cricket as an example, do almost totally without such language. Cricket does it by adopting a totally exotic vocabulary for its elements: googlies, yorkers, off-stump, silly mid off, bowl, hook, century, hat trick, maiden over, leg bye, etc. This poses a considerable barrier for its fans, who must master this new set of terms. Here is the remarkable thing about the game, however...there is not a single term in the vocabulary of cricket that I know of which reaches into the language of violence. But it could have. Had the game been conceptualized as a war-substitute, a number of military metaphors could have been exploited to describe the game.

If the cricket example does not seem compelling to you, imagine that instead of employing the language of military conflict to describe our sports, we used (and this would be perfectly plausible in the hyper-capitalist country we are) the language of accounting or the market as our fundamental comparison. Then we might report

Xavier outperformed Cornell
Cornell ended in the red by six points against Xavier
Xavier out-tallied Cornell
Cornell tumbled relative to Xavier, etc.

However odd this sounds, it would sound as natural as our current language does if this reconfiguring were in place for a while.⁸

⁸I would like to note that the language of swordplay dominates a lot of the academic imagination. I imagine the following bit of fictional writing:

ATouche!@ thought George. Fred's rapier-like wit had always impressed him. Just when he thought he had Fred in the thrust and parry of their exchanges, George managed to let Fred get the upper hand. With his slashing wit and pointed barbs Fred could be counted on to decide these contests of will.

Summary⁹: Those who are charged with committing violence on behalf of the state will adopt language designed to obscure from themselves (in the field) or us (in the public sphere) the reality of what violence they do on our behalf. They will do so in slightly different ways, however. In the field the language will serve to dehumanize the other while in the public sphere the language will be designed to convince us that our violence toward others is justified. When it comes to describing the actions of violence, in contradistinction to the people who are the object of violence, on the battlefield the agents will use “standard” euphemisms which soften the blunt description of what is occurring, while in the public sphere, the military and politicians will opt for “Orwellian” euphemism which gut (irony intended) the language of any emotive connection to the violence described, revealing the Acatalog of swindles and perversions@ which Orwell railed against in the famous essay with which this paper’s preface began.¹⁰

Meanwhile the language of our ordinary and even admired activities is so saturated with the terms of violence and conflict that it requires a genuine and thoughtful analysis of the media and the world around us to remain freshly aware of the moral dimensions of our culture and our own place within it.

⁹ Note that I haven=t, in this paper, covered true doublespeak in the public sphere or even the recent examples where politicians have made clear their intent to abandon certain words with the explicit intent of manipulating public opinion, as when John Hernandez, deputy administrator of the EPA, explained that words like "hazard" would no longer be used by the EPA, and instead of talking about "degree of hazard" the EPA would refer to "degree of mitigation of risk." Note also President Bush=s attempt to escape from the commitment to a policy of Astay the course,@ which had come to mean Astay committed to permanent violence in Iraq.@ This is an important topic but I judged it not central to my topic.

¹⁰ Here is Orwell in pure railing mode: "In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible.... Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness.... [It] is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind."