



"Every individual or national degeneration is immediately revealed by a directly proportional degeneration in language."

—Joseph de Maistre

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Semantics

Have you ever been in a verbal squabble in which your opponent brought the conversation to a screeching halt with the accusation, "You're using semantics!"?

People with theological disagreements level this charge frequently. In fact, anyone whose livelihood depends on the use of language must ward off this accusation by ensuring that he defines his terms well so that his audience understands him. Even so, he cannot always guard against assumptions and viewpoints of which he himself is unaware, not to mention that sometimes it proves impossible to agree on common definitions of terms.

Before going further, then, we should define semantics. The Tenth Edition of *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* gives its first definition as "the study of meanings: the historical and psychological study and the classifications of changes in the signification of words or forms viewed as factors in linguistic development." This, of course, is its technical definition. In common parlance, semantics is "the language used (as in advertising or political propaganda) to achieve a desired effect on an audience especially through the use of words with novel or dual meanings."

Semantics plays a large part in our life, and most of us live blithely unaware of it. This ignorance of the difference between assumed meanings and true meanings of terms is a weapon in the hands of opinion-shapers like media outlets, political parties, and special interest groups. For instance, the homosexual lobby in America fought a losing battle until they began to call themselves "gay." This put a positive, even merry, spin on a lifestyle that is anything but.

There are many other famous examples of this semantic fudge in recent American history. The abortion-rights crowd changed their focus to "a woman's right to choose," and scored a terrible victory in America's highest court. At the same time, liberal cultural elites—particularly in the mainstream media—branded pro-life advocates as "anti-choice," making them seem like Nazis or worse.

This semantic war devolved into the politically correct (PC) movement that shrouds America's learning institutions (from kindergarten to post-graduate levels), media outlets, and social and political life. What we used to call perversions are now politely termed "alternative lifestyles." Some people are not fat, bald, or handicapped, they are somehow "challenged," that is, deficient or defective. In many cases, calling a spade a spade can land a person in cold-challenged water!

The most recent semantic debates illuminate the lunacy of it all. Recently, Reuters commanded all its reporters and writers to stop using the term "terrorist" in favor of "freedom fighter," citing the sophistry that "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter." In the same vein, the press has used "suicide bomber," which the Bush administration countered with "homicide bomber." Why do we not just call them what they are—murderers?

One that slipped by many—and to my shame, me too—is the media's use of "pedophile" in the Catholic Church sex scandal of late. *Pedophilia* (literally, "child-love") is a general term, meaning "sexual activity of an adult with a child." The more accurate term is *pederasty* (literally, "child-sex"), "sexual relations between a man and a boy (usually anal intercourse with the boy as a passive partner)." The first term, being general, is more "acceptable," while

the second is damning, drawing a spotlight to a practice that the powerful homosexual lobby in America does not want Joe Public to associate with its "gay lifestyle."

Words do matter because, even though they are symbols, we attach meanings to them and draw conclusions from them. What goes into our minds as words affects the way we think and believe, and eventually, they come out in the form of behaviors (see [Matthew 15:11-20](#); [Mark 7:14-23](#)). The words that come from [this world](#) are often twisted—spun—so that we accept something that we would not accept if we had the whole truth. It is vitally important, therefore, that we "test all things; hold fast what is good" ([1 Thessalonians 5:21](#)), even to the real meanings of labels used in the media for various activities, ideas, or groups.

On the brighter side, remember what [Jesus](#) says to us about His words: "The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life" ([John 6:63](#)). What a refreshing difference!

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Words of Life, Words of Death](#)

by David F. Maas

In this "nuts and bolts" split sermon on overcoming, David Maas, using a list of cognitive distortions (twisted thinking patterns) compiled by Dr. David Burns in his book "Feeling Good," provides a practical technique for bringing every thought into captivity (I Corinthians 10:5). Numerous biblical and personal examples illustrate the ten cognitive distortions known as (1) All-or-nothing (2)Overgeneralization (3) Mental Filter (4) Disqualifying the Positive (5a) Mind Reading (5b) Fortune Telling (6) Magnification and Minimization (7)Emotional reasoning (8) Should Statements (9) Labeling or Mislabeled (10) Personalization and Blame. By exposing the negative self-talk, we can turn the self-imposed words of death into words of life.

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[The Ninth Commandment \(1997\)](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

The Ninth Commandment: You Shall Not Bear False Witness.

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