

*The following opinion piece was authored by Adam Lockyer.
Adam Lockyer is an analyst for The Terrorism Intelligence Centre
and a tutor of security studies in the Department of Government
and International Relations at the University of Sydney. He is also
completing his masters' thesis within the ANU's GSSD programme.
18 August 2003*

The Relationship between the Media and Terrorism

Adam Lockyer

*"...if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.
A bad usage can spread by tradition and imitation,
even among people who should know better."*

– George Orwell¹

The language, with which the media² reports and discusses insurgent terrorist³ organisations and their actions, is extremely important, as the language which it adopts often will set the parameters for public discourse. The phraseology and terminology of the insurgent terrorists and government officials are generally at odds, thus the media is forced to adopt one or the other's word or phrase which, in turn, will generally become the accepted way to express that idea in the public forum. Therefore, if the terrorist organisation or the counter-terrorist group can induce the media to accept their nomenclature, it has already won an important psychological victory.

Most studies into the relationship between terrorism and the media have focused on the response of the media to terrorist incidents.⁴ They have generally agreed that the relationship between terrorism and the mass media is 'symbiotic', in that insurgent terrorist organisations use the media as a conduit for their political message to be heard by the target audience, whilst supplying 'exciting news' for the media.⁵ Furthermore, most previous studies have focused on either the political, legal or psychological aspects of the relationship between the media and terrorism, while largely ignoring other methods of analysis. This paper aims at taking the first tentative steps of expanding the study of the relationship between terrorism and the media by taking a linguistic and semantical approach. To achieve this aim, this text will be broken into two distinct sections. The first will be a brief discussion of the ways in which

the terrorist's and counter-terrorist's language can make its way into common usage in the media. The second section will introduce some of the semantic issues that arise from value and moralist language becoming the acceptable language in public discourse.

In Janny de Graaf's esteemed text, *Violence as Communication*, de Graaf argues that when journalists interview sources there is a 'good chance' that they will also inadvertently adopt some of the source's language⁶; that means in practice, that when a journalist uses an insurgent terrorist as a source, the terrorist's romantic language often seduces the journalist into unconsciously adopting it. An example of this phenomenon occurred during the kidnapping and subsequent murder of former-Italian Premier Aldo Moro, when the editor of *La Repubblica* ran the headline 'They Have Struck The Heart of The State', which seems to be a direct paraphrase of the Red Brigade's statement '...we have carried the attack into the very heart of the state.'⁷ The terrorist organisation had clearly excited the newspaper with their engaging language.

The media, however, does not only adopt the language of the terrorist. De Graaf also pointed out that 'in many cases' the news media automatically adopts the nomenclature of the government.⁸ However, most commentators do not allege that the media is seduced by the language of the government, rather is intimidated by the government's perceived information superiority.⁹

Moreover, due to terrorism's enormous emotional impact, there is often a lack of neutral words with which to describe the incident. There are, for example, few neutral nouns for journalists to describe an insurgent terrorist, as, 'terrorist', 'soldier', 'freedom fighter', 'criminal', or 'guerrilla' all require the journalist to make a moral judgement (see table below). Therefore, often journalists are forced to employ words which seem to indicate a bias out of lack of a more neutral substitute.

Some examples of Terrorist and Counter-Terrorist labels and nomenclature for the same thing¹⁰

1. Criminal – Revolutionary	10. Aggression – Preventive Counter Strike
2. Terrorist – Guerrilla	11. Assassin – Avenger
3. Murderer – Freedom Fighter	12. Propaganda – Communiqué
4. Gang – Army	13. Extremist Fanatic – Dedicated Anti-Imperialist
5. Subversive element – Liberator	14. Attack- Operation
6. Bloodbath – Purge	15. Hired Killer- Example of Revolutionary Solidarity
7. Lunatic – Martyr	16. Murder – Revolutionary Justice
8. Mercenary – Soldier	
9. Threat – Warning	

A. Odasua Alali asserts that the result is that journalists act as 'rhetorical amplifiers' for either terrorists or government officials.¹¹ Thus, whichever terminology the media adopts quickly becomes, in Schlesinger's apt words, the 'primary definitions of social reality'.¹² Take for example, John Mold's comments in the 'Letters' section of *The Australian*,

...George Bush... (and)...neo-conservative thinkers like Paul Wolfowitz, whose aim appears to be the protection of Israel under the guise of a **war against terrorism**.

The Bush/Wolfowitz policy of **pre-emptive strikes** against alleged **rogue states** starting with Iraq, is a sure path to **continuous war** which should not involve us. Our only hope for **world peace** is the UN and continued and increased support for the body. (Emphasis added)¹³

It is clear that Mold disagrees with the current Australian policy, however in order to join the debate Mold had no choice but to employ the United States Government's anti-terrorist rhetoric, such as 'pre-emptive strike' and 'rogue state'. The media, by adopting the United States' anti-terrorist vocabulary, has limited the way in which Mold can express his views, thus has successfully set the parameters of the public debate.¹⁴

George Orwell dedicated much of his academic career to highlighting the threat to an individual's cognitive processes from what he disparagingly termed 'journalese' or 'officialese'.¹⁵ Orwell argued in *Politics and the English Language*, that when an individual becomes a slave to official jargon they are, in a sense, gagged. Individuals are prone to use 'officialese' and follow the 'mindless thought grooves' which, in Orwell's opinion, could easily be replaced with more precious and thoughtful terms. However, 'officialese' is continually regurgitated by citizens in the public discourse without any knowledge of the semantic meaning of the language that they employ.¹⁶

Orwell was a student of semantics, and thus fully knew of the close relationship between language and thought. Although the validity of the concept of 'linguistic determinism'¹⁷ is an ongoing debate within the social sciences, it has been well established that the 'pre-packaging' of language has a direct impact on thought. The 'pre-packaging', or the prior digestion, of concepts and ideas generally results in an oversimplification and stereotyping of language.¹⁸ From this perspective, one can see that one of the functions of the media is to 'pre-pack' terrorist incidents and make them and increase the ease in which an audience can assimilate them. For example, terms such as 'terrorist', 'act of terror', 'fundamentalism' or 'threat' act as familiar signposts for the audience,

allowing them to give structure to their thoughts, which would otherwise be incomprehensible due their complexity. In short, the concepts of black (terrorist?) and white (counter-terrorist?) are relative easy to describe, as they are bi-polar, however shades of grey (where truth and reality normally reside) is notoriously difficult to describe in words.

Therefore, in conclusion, words are more than mere symbols that convey meaning. Words influence thought and limit the ideas and concepts that can be transferred from one individual to the next. As we have seen in this paper, the media plays a central role in telling the public what words will be judged by society to be appropriate in any new discourse. Thus, it is of crucial importance to both insurgent terrorists and state agencies that the media uses their language to describe acts of politically motivated violence.

Notes

-
1. George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language' in *The Collected Essays of George Orwell* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968) p.167.
 2. 'The Media' for the purposes of this paper is defined as any medium of information that periodically communicates current data and analysis to the general population.
 3. 'Terrorism' for the purposes of this paper is defined as 'politically (or religiously, or socially) motivated violence, generally directed against non-combatants, intended to shock and terrify, to achieve a strategic outcome.' The focus is on insurgent terrorism and counter-terrorism, as differentiated from state terrorism or state-sponsored terrorism.
 4. See Brigitte Nacos, *Terrorism and the Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) and Philip Schlesinger, *Media, State and Nation: Political Violence and collective Identities* (London: Sage Publications, 1991).
 5. See Nacos, *ibid.*, pp.48-53.
 6. Alex Schmid and Janny de Graaf, *Violence as Communication: Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media* (London: Sage Publications, 1982) p.88.
 7. Giovanni Bechelloni, 'Il Colpo di Stato in Diretta', *La Repubblica*, (17 March 1978) cited in Robin Erica Wagner-Pacifici, *The Moro Morality Play: Terrorism as Social Drama* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986) p.90.
 8. De Graaf, *op. cit.*, p.65.
 9. Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing of Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988). In *Manufacturing of Consent*, Herman and Chomsky explain their highly influential 'propaganda model', which aims to explain why the media in the United States rarely deviates from the opinion of the US corporate and political elites. This essay has mentioned only one of the propaganda model's five filters, that of government having a competitive advantage over information. Herman and Chomsky, however, take this argument further by pointing out that journalists rely on elite sources for a continual flow of relevant information, so they are generally hesitant to offend their sources for fear of that flow being cut. The other filters in the propaganda model are 'corporate filters' (pp. 3-14), 'advertising' (p.17), 'flak' (p.27) and 'ideological filters' (p.29).
 10. A similar table appears in de Graaf, *op. cit.*, p.88.

-
11. A. Odasuo Alali and Kenoye Kelvin Eke, (ed.) *Media Coverage of Terrorism: Methods of Diffusion* (London: Sage Publications, 1991) pp.42-43.
 12. Schlesinger, *op. cit.*, p.20.
 13. John Mold, 'Letters', in Chris Mitchell (Editor-in-Chief), *The Australian*, (18 March 2003) p.10. John Mold's letter to *The Australian* was only one example of where the public's voice was laced with involuntary rhetoric and nomenclature. Almost every 'Letter' had examples of the involuntary use of officialese rhetoric.
 14. The 'public discourse' does not merely include the general citizenry, though also those who Orwell points out 'should know better'. *The New York Times* is a newspaper that regularly attracts contributions from leading, academics, politicians and journalists. However, a quick survey of the use of language in *The New York Times* suggests that it is indeed a culprit. *The New York Times* has an extensive electronic database of articles published in the newspaper since 1 January 1996. The terrifying, vague, and inaccurate term of 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' or 'WMD' has gained favour in political circles since 11 September 2001. The term also seems to have gained favour within articles published in *The New York Times*. Since 1 January 1996, there have been 3,878 articles published with the term, 1,903 (or 49.07 percent) of which were printed after 11 September 2001. Since 1 January 1996, there have been 1,122 articles printed with the more neutral and accurate term 'Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Weapons' or 'NBC', 224 (or 19.96 percent) of which were printed after 11 September 2001. A similar percentage of 22.18 can be found for the term 'Unconventional Weapons'. Therefore, these figures indicate that, since 11 September 2001, there has been an overall increase in the number of articles referring to Nuclear, Biological and Chemical weapons; however, the term 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' has by far enjoyed the greatest relative increase in popularity.
 15. See Geoffrey Leech, *Semantics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974) p.41.
 16. Orwell, *op. cit.*, p.157.
 17. See Dan Slobin, *Language and Thought*, www.isadc.org/web2_thought.html, accessed on 18 March 2003, for the latest arguments and ideas in the 'linguistic determinism' debate.
 18. Leech, *op. cit.*, pp.38-40.

Bibliography

Alali, A., Eke, K., (ed.) *Media Coverage of Terrorism: Methods of Diffusion*, Sage Publications, London, 1991

Der Derian, J., *9.11: Before, After and In Between*, Social Science Research Council, www.ssrc.org/sept11/essays/der_derian.htm, accessed on 20 March 2003

Hayakawa, S., *Language in Thought and Action*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1952

Herman, E., Chomsky, N., *Manufacturing of Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, Pantheon, New York, 1988

Leech, G., *Semantics*, Penguin Books, Middlesex, 1974

Leeman, R., *The Rhetoric of Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, Greenwood Press, New York, 1991

Nacos, B., *Terrorism and the Media*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994

Orwell, G., *The Collected Essays of George Orwell (Vol. 4, 1945-1950)*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1968

Paletz, D., Schmid, A., (ed.) *Terrorism and the Media*, Sage Publications, London, 1992

Saul, J., *The Unconscious Civilization*, Penguin Books, London, 1995

Schlesinger, P., *Media, State and Nation: Political Violence and Collective Identities*, Sage Publications, London, 1991

Schmid, A., de Graaf, J., *Violence as Communication: Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media*, Sage Publications, London, 1982

Slobin, D., *Language and Thought*, University of California, www.lsadc.org/web2/lg_thought.html, accessed on 18 March 2003

Wagner-Pacifici, R., *The Moro Morality Play: Terrorism as Social Drama*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1986