

# *Must We Say What We Mean?: Political Language and the Construction of Reality*

**by Amy Sodaro**

**H**annah Arendt asserted that “whatever men do or know or experience can make sense only to the extent that it can be spoken about.” The power of language in our ability to interpret and experience the world around us is immeasurable. It is, after all, one of our only means of translating our individual feelings and sensations into comprehensible concepts; these concepts can then be shared with others, allowing us to interact as social beings. It is for this reason that it is vitally important for us to say what we mean, for language has the potential to be used as a very deadly weapon. Because it serves the purpose of describing and reflecting objective reality, as far as this is possible, the use of “opaque” language also has the power to manipulate, or even create reality. Unfortunately this power has often been used in political language with the purpose of altering the listeners’ perceptions of reality in order to better control their opinions and behavior.

Since language is a means of expressing and interpreting reality in concrete terms, when a regime or government uses language that is deliberately

opaque with the purpose of obfuscating reality, they are in effect recreating reality to suit their purposes. This sort of language—usually in the form of euphemisms, vague political jargon, or evasion—all amounts to Orwell’s political language which “is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.”

Perhaps the most chilling example of language not only concealing reality, but also, in fact, creating a new reality, is in the Nazi use of euphemism. Their ruthlessly efficient extermination of the Jews was psychologically possible only to the extent that the individual Nazis could distance themselves from the harsh reality of their atrocious actions. This distancing was accomplished not only by their technology, which made

