

JOURNALESE AS A SECOND TONGUE

John Leo

Jargon is the special language of a trade; and nearly every trade has one to shortcut communication. Journalism is no exception. We hear reportage codes and formulas so frequently that we may have missed what's actually being communicated—and what's not. In the article below, John Leo explains where meaning and phrasing depart in reporting the news. As catchy as journalese might be, it can be "as misleading as olive sizes."

John Leo is a New York writer who served as New York City's Assistant Commissioner of the Environmental Protection Agency during the John Lindsay mayoral administration. He has been a reporter and editor for the *New York Times* and *Discover* magazine and a columnist in the *Village Voice*. This article first appeared in *Time* magazine in 1984.

As a cub reporter, Columnist Richard Cohen of the *Washington Post* rushed out one day to interview a lawyer described in many newspaper reports as "ruddy-faced." The man was woozily abusive and lurched about with such abandon that young Cohen instantly realized that the real meaning of ruddy-faced is drunk. This was his introduction to journalese, the fascinating second tongue acquired by most reporters as effortlessly as an Iranian toddler learns Farsi or a Marin County child learns psychobabble.

Fluency in journalese means knowing all about "the right stuff," "gender gap," "life in the fast lane" and the vexing dilemma of being caught "between a rock and a hard place," the current Scylla-Charybdis image. The Middle East is "strife-torn," except during those inexplicable moments when peace breaks out. Then it is always "much troubled." Kuwait is located just east of the adjective "oil-rich," and the Irish Republican Army always lurks right behind the

word “outlawed.” The hyphenated modifier is the meat and potatoes of journalese. Who can forget “the break-away province of Biafra,” “the mop-top quartet” (the mandatory second reference to the Beatles) and the “ill-fated Korean jetliner,” not to be confused with the “ill-fitting red wig” of Watergate fame. Murderers on death row are often saved by “eleventh-hour” reprieves, which would be somewhere between 10 and 11 P.M. in English but shortly before midnight in journalese.

- 3 Much of the difficulty in mastering journalese comes from its slight overlap with English. “Imposing,” for instance, when used to describe a male, retains its customary English meaning, but when used in reference to a female, it always means battle-ax. “Feisty” refers to a person whom the journalist deems too short and too easily enraged, though many in the journalese-speaking fraternity believe it is simply the adjective of choice for any male under 5 ft. 6 in. who is not legally dead. This usage reflects the continual surprise among tall journalists that short people have any energy at all. Women are not often feisty, though they are usually short enough to qualify. No journalist in America has ever referred to a 6-ft. male as feisty. At that height, men are simply “outspoken” (*i.e.*, abusive).
- 4 In general, adjectives in journalese are as misleading as olive sizes. Most news consumers know enough to translate “developing nations” and “disadvantaged nations” back into English, but far smaller numbers know that “militant” means fanatic, and “steadfast” means pigheaded. “Controversial” introduces someone or something the writer finds appalling, as in “the controversial Miss Fonda,” and “prestigious” heralds the imminent arrival of a noun nobody cares about, as in “the prestigious Jean Hersholt Humanitarian Award.”
- 5 Television anchorpersons add interest to their monologues by accenting a few syllables chosen at random. Since print journalists cannot do this, except when reading aloud to spouse and children, they strive for a similar effect by using words like crisis and revolution. Crisis means any kind of trouble at all, and revolution means any kind of change at all, as in “the revolution in meat packing.” “Street value” lends excitement to any drug-bust story, without bearing any financial relationship to the actual value of drugs being busted. Many meaningless adjectives, preferably hyphenated for proper rhythm, are permanently welded to certain nouns: blue-ribbon panel, fact-finding mission, devout Catholic, and rock-ribbed Republican. In journalese there are no devout Protestants or Jews, and no Democrats with strong or stony ribs.
- 6 Historians of journalese will agree that the first flowering of the language occurred in the sexist descriptions of women by splashy tabloids during the '30s and '40s. In contrast to Pentagonese, which favors oxymorons (Peace-keeper missiles, build-down), the tabloids relied on synecdoche (leggy brunette, bosome blonde, full-figured redhead). Full-figured, of course, meant fat, and “well-endowed” did not refer to Ford Foundation funding. “Statuesque” (too large, mooselike) and “petite” (too small, mouselike) were adjectives of last resort, meaning that the woman under discussion had no bodily parts that interested the writer. A plain, short woman was invariably “pert.” For years, masters

of this prose cast about for a nonlibelous euphemism for “mistress.” The winning entry, “great and good friend,” used to describe Marion Davies’ relationship to William Randolph Hearst, was pioneered, as it happens, by a non-Hearst publication, *TIME* magazine. “Constant companion” evolved later, and gave way to such clunking modernisms as “roommate” and “live-in lover.” Nowadays, the only sexuality about which journalese is coy tends to be homosexuality, and that is adequately covered by “he has no close female friends” or “he is not about to settle down.”

In political campaigns, underdogs fight uphill battles and hope for shifts of momentum and coattail effects, all leading to rising tides that will enable the favorite to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. A politician who has no idea about what is going on can be described as one who prefers “to leave details to subordinates.” A gangster who runs a foreign country will be referred to as “strongman” until his death, and dictator thereafter. Strongman, like many terms in journalese, has no true correlative. “Nicaraguan Strongman Somoza” is not balanced with “Cambodian Weakman Prince Sihanouk.”

What to say about a public figure who is clearly bonkers? Since it is unsporting and possibly libelous to write: “Representative Forbush, the well-known raving psychopath,” journalese has evolved the code words difficult, intense and driven. If an article says, “like many of us, Forbush has his ups and downs,” the writer is wigwagging a manic-depressive.

Political journalese, of course, requires a knowledge of sources. An unnamed analyst or observer can often be presumed to be the writer of the article. The popular plural “observers,” or “analysts,” refers to the writer and his cronies. Insiders, unlike observer-analysts, sometimes exist in the real world outside the newsroom. This, however, is never true of quotable chestnut vendors in Paris, Greenwich Village bartenders and other colorful folk conjured up on deadline to lend dash to a story.

Almost all sources, like most trial balloonists, live in or around Washington. In order of ascending rectitude, they are: informants, usually reliable sources, informed sources, authoritative sources, sources in high places and unimpeachable sources. Informants are low-level operatives, whose beans are normally spilled to police rather than to reporters. Informed sources, because of their informed nature, are consulted most often by savvy journalists. An unimpeachable source is almost always the President, with the obvious exception of Richard Nixon, who was not unimpeachable.

Journalese is controversial but prestigious, and observers are steadfast in averring that it has the right stuff.

TOPICAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. In your own words, define what *journalese* is. How is journalese used? Before reading this article, had you taken notice of it? Have you used journalese in your own speech or writing? If so, give some examples.
2. Look over the article again. What do you think about journalism that uses euphemistic or indirect phrases such as “constant companion” to describe a mistress

or “has his ups and downs” to describe a mentally unstable public figure? Why are such journalese expressions enlisted? In general, would you prefer more explicit language by the media?

3. Consider Leo’s interpretations of journalese terms *militant* and *steadfast* in paragraph 4. What do you make of these translations? Did you read the words with the same interpretations in mind? Why or why not?
4. Do you think journalese affects the credibility of reporting? Where and how? Which of Leo’s examples do you condone and which would you disapprove of? What principle governs your decisions? Explain your answer.
5. Review some of the articles in Chapter 7, Language, Gender, and Sexism (pages 395–482). Now consider what Leo says about gender stereotyping in journalese. How has the press helped perpetuate sexual prejudice? Consider the values operating when certain males are called *feisty* and certain females are called *imposing*.
6. What do you think the author’s purpose was in writing this piece? What did you learn from it? What most impressed you about the article? Do you think your response to media reporting has been altered any? Explain your answers.

RHETORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. Did you find this article funny? If so, in what ways did the humor contribute to your understanding of the subject matter? Explain with examples.
2. What would you say is the author’s opinion of journalese? In what ways does he project this opinion?
3. Explain the effectiveness of the title Leo chose for his article. What are the implications of “a second tongue”?

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Go through a newspaper and locate as many examples of journalese as you can. Now edit out these terms so the stories read without them. How does the original language affect your perception of what you’ve read? How does your editing change the reporting? Does the tone of the articles change? Is the reporting less clever and colorful? less exciting? What about the clarity and credibility of the writing? Write your findings and observations in an essay.
2. For humorous effect, the closing line in Leo’s article is rendered completely in journalese. Have some fun of your own by writing a news article completely in journalese formulas. Or, select a current news story low in journalese and rewrite it so that it’s thick with the lingo.