NO MORE BOATS

LIKE A VIRUS

Rabid
Dogs

Bug
Splat

* where people
are referred to
as animals or
objects.

DEHUMANISING

language

The Economy
is growing

↓

We are
growing
the
Economy.

EffectiveEFFECT
ive EFFECTIVE Va
ive VOICE Effe
EFFeCtiVE V
middle Voice middle
middla Voice Voi
middle Voice
Midde Voice
Voice middle
iddle Voice Middle
Voice Middle

Active
vs.
Passive
Voice

BUG
← SPLAT

Collaction

Women's
Work

Labour

Debt

Deficit

Refugees criminal
illegitimate

Mobilise

Opinion

THE WAR
on words

*Ever wondered how you find yourself agreeing with outrageous
political comments, even if deep down you know you feel differently?
It all comes down to wordplay, and once you know the tricks,
you can use them to your own advantage.*

Words *Dan Kaufman*
Illustration *Rosanna Vecchio*

WHEN BOB CARR BECAME FOREIGN
AFFAIRS MINISTER IN 2012, HE COMPARED
TONY ABBOTT'S USE OF SLOGANS SUCH
AS 'NO MORE BOATS' TO A "TRAINEE
HYPNOTIST TRYING TO WORK WONDERS
ON A COBRA IN A BASKET".

Yet despite this ridicule, the cobra – the
media and the public that consumes it –
still reacted; no surprise considering the
power that slogans wield.

"In our media-saturated society, slogans
give a hook, a position in a nutshell
that people can digest quickly," says
Professor Joseph Pugliese (BA/DipEd,
1985), Research Director of Macquarie
University's Department of Media, Music,
Communication and Cultural Studies.

"The smart thing Abbott did was to mobilise
those slogans like mantras, so that they
sunk into the subconscious landscape of this
country. It created a succinct way to mobilise
opinion against refugees and asylum seekers.

"There's that hypnotic effect. The more you
say it, the more normal it becomes – that's
the key. It normalises the message you
want to get across, even though it could be
outrageous or unacceptable – but you say
it often enough and it becomes part of the
landscape and people accept it as legitimate."

VIRAL SPREAD

Furthermore, the repetition of words
works for more than just slogans.

"One of the ways in which language
works is in reiteration and patterning,
and what we technically call 'collocation',"
explains Dr Annabelle Lukin (PhD, 2003),
a Research Fellow at the Centre for
Language and Social Life and senior
lecturer in linguistics.

"Collaction is hearing similar words in
similar company all the time, so that
part of the meaning of a word 'comes
from the company it keeps', to quote JR
Firth, who was a British linguist in the
40s and 50s."

Lukin uses the phrase 'women's work' as
an example, saying that most people still
automatically associate it with work such
as nursing and housework despite decades
of feminism.

"One of the things the Liberal Party
has done to Labor is to create this very
close association between Labor and
debt and deficit, and you can see this in
Costello's discourse over the period he was
Treasurer," Lukin says. "Even if you don't

say debt and deficit, the Liberals have
created this conjunction between Labor
and debt and deficit.

"So you can shift the ground through a
policy where you go looking for consistent
collocations and you get everybody on
your team to say them whenever they
can, and after a while it's like a virus that
spreads around – so you find yourself
thinking something even though if you
consciously think about it you don't
believe it."

Language can also be used to reframe
a situation, such as by replacing people
with abstract notions. Lukin says a good
example is when Julia Gillard spoke
about 'smashing the people smugglers'
business model'.

"One of the interesting things that
happens in the public discourse
around refugees is you have to be seen
as strong, but hopefully not be seen
to be cruel to the people fleeing many
of these terrible regimes," Lukin says.
"So this phrase of 'smashing something' –
you get that macho sense of taking
very firm action, but the object of
the verb is 'the people smugglers'
business model', which is something
quite abstract."

What makes the use – and abuse – of language so insidious is its subconscious effect upon us.

"It [language] has this breathtaking reach in our lives – so for it to have that power and presence, it has to be really complex, but we have to be able to use it so that we don't think about every word coming out of our mouths," Lukin says. "Most of what's going on linguistically is hard to see."

This is where grammar can be cleverly used by those in the know.

"In the Budget speeches Wayne Swan would say something like 'The economy is growing' – which is middle voice – and Peter Costello would say something such as 'We are growing the economy', which is effective voice in the active style," Lukin says.

Although some people are familiar with active versus passive voice – a sentence is active when its subject does something to the object, such as 'The cat chased the mouse' as opposed to 'The mouse was chased by the cat' – effective voice is when an agent causes a process, and middle voice is when no agent is mentioned.

"This has been a feature in the reporting of war, where you can say 'The war has escalated' or you can say 'The US has escalated the war'," Lukin says. "So you get that distinction again between middle voice and what we call effective voice, so in effective voice you are giving external agency to the process – the process doesn't engender itself, it is caused by an agent.

"If you want to report in a way that appears neutral, then you use middle voice because it looks like you're not giving responsibility to anyone or anything for creating the conditions you're reporting on. So you say 'The war is escalating, the war continues, the war has begun'. All of these structures you see are a one-participant structure in grammatical terms without any external agency.

"Another example is that you can say '10 civilians died when a US air raid struck a suburb in Baghdad'. You say the Iraqis died – not that they were killed. This same grammatical distinction operates everywhere."

Choosing words that conjure the right associations is key. As Lukin points out, the word 'violence', for example, creates different associations in most people's minds than 'war'.

"All of our associations around war are largely neutral or positive," Lukin says. "For instance, we talk about people serving the nation, fighting for something – war is toward some greater good, so that's entailed in the semantics. We're far more likely to say he 'fought and died', not 'he fought and killed'.

"There is an ideological schism in our language. If we validate the use of force it's called war. If we don't, it's called violence, and it's a violation, illegal and an infringement of people's rights."

In her research into the reporting of war, Lukin found that journalists almost never used the word 'violence' – except if they were talking about anti-war protestors.

"Even a protest by students in Sydney where a couple of chairs were thrown around gets reported as 'violence in a protest in Sydney'. And then Bob Carr comes out and says it's never okay to use violence to make a point, so there's this heightened condemnation of violence by people protesting against the war, and at the same time the coalition is unleashing this whole bombardment on Baghdad that by conservative estimates, in that two-week period, killed … the absolute minimal figure would be 4000 civilians."

DEHUMANISING LANGUAGE

The use of dehumanising language, where people are referred to as animals or objects, also relies on word associations.

It's easy to find examples, from the US Republican presidential candidate Ben Carson comparing Syrian refugees to rabid dogs late last year to the Nazis referring to Jews as rats. However, dehumanising language seems to be especially favoured by the military.

Pugliese, who wrote *State Violence and Execution of Law: Biopolitical Caesurae of Torture, Black Sites, Drones*, says "(US drone pilots) call the actual victims of drone strikes 'bug splat', and so basically they reduce humans to entomological waste.

"That animal language divests people of their human rights and reduces them to animal objects upon which violence can be performed legitimately and with impunity," he adds.

In other words, it makes it easier for soldiers to kill.

"Perpetuating that kind of violence is not something that humans easily accept, because we seem to be so florid

> ❝ *There is an ideological schism in our language. If we validate the use of force it's called war. If we don't, it's called violence.* ❞

and prolific in our ways of justifying, legitimating and rationalising the killing of people," Lukin says.

"You have to create in your warrior class the disposition to accept the killing of another human being, and a key thing is to make the killer believe that the object of the killing is someone somehow less than human."

Closer to home, refugees arriving by boat are called 'illegal' by the government – even though refugees actually do have the right to seek asylum under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – and are referred to on Nauru and Manus Island as 'detainees', which sparks the connection in peoples' minds with prison.

"It criminalises refugees and asylum seekers before the fact; it brands them as illegitimate, illegal and thus potentially criminal," Pugliese says.

One of the more ridiculous – and horrific – examples of euphemisms is the US government's description of torture as 'enhanced interrogation techniques'.

"Through the use of euphemisms they were pretending they weren't torturing, and in a sense the public bought that because you had the PR estate talking about 'enhanced interrogation techniques' instead of torture," Pugliese says.

"In effect it enabled them [the US] to violate their own anti-torture statutes and the international covenant against torture to which the US is a signatory and has ratified.

"You can see how language is really insidious and is enabling practices that actually violate the state's own laws."