

EVOLUTION OR CORRUPTION? THE IMPOSITION OF POLITICAL LANGUAGE IN THE WEST TODAY

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ABSTRACT

Language is an institution in society, not only a cognitive tool for communication. Like all institutions, it evolves organically over time but is also subject to corruption and capture by political agendas. Natural linguistic evolution might be compared to a “marketplace” operating like a laissez-faire economic system, while corrupted or imposed changes to language might be compared to state intervention in this marketplace.

This paper briefly examines the question of linguistic evolution vs. corruption in the context of social sciences, particularly politics and economics. Starting with Orwell’s concept of “meaningless words,” it considers recent political events in the US and UK; the linguistic demands of social justice movements; the rise in “woke” messaging from corporations and central bankers; and related phenomena. It suggests many of the linguistic changes rapidly occurring across the English-speaking world are not organic but instead imposed by elites with political agendas

Changes in language ultimately affect not only how we communicate, but also how we think, feel, and act. Economists, political scientists, philosophers, and other social scientists should take greater interest in the role language plays in their disciplines. The language they use informs and may even change the substantive content of those disciplines, so precision and consistency are critical.

KEYWORDS

Language - Evolution - Corruption - Woke - Social Justice

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is the perfect instrument of empire.
Antonio de Nebrija, Bishop of Avila, 1492

Language is an institution in society. In both its oral and written forms¹, language functions as a mechanism for communication and as a cognitive tool. But language serves much broader societal and even civilizational functions. Like any institution it

¹ “Language” for purposes of this essay is written or spoken words, not nonverbal communication.

changes and evolves naturally, without design or centralized control. We might analogize this natural linguistic evolution to a “marketplace,” operating like a liberal or laissez-faire economic system. But language is also subject to corruption, to impositions from actors seeking to control or shape speech for their benefit—e.g., kings, clerics, government officials, politicians, journalists, or professors. We might analogize this type of “unnatural” or imposed evolution in language to a hampered economy, marked by state intervention in the linguistic “marketplace.” But either way, linguistic evolution is relentless and inescapable.

Examples are manifest. Latin once was spoken across the sweep of the Roman Empire, beginning seven centuries before Christ—imposed (or at least introduced by soldiers) over hundreds of local vernaculars as a byproduct of conquest. Today, at least in the view of Pope Francis, Latin is a “dead language.”² Germanic tribes spoke Old English in the 5th to 12th centuries, only to be replaced by Middle English across most of today’s United Kingdom beginning in the 13th century. The Modern English of Shakespeare and the King James Bible then became the language of the Anglosphere. And the process continues, as late Modern usages like “betwixt” or “wherefore” would sound odd in conversations today.

Again, language evolves through both natural and “unnatural” (corrupted or imposed) processes. How and why both happen is exceedingly complex and multifaceted, and beyond the scope of this essay. Changes in language over time and across geography reflect phenomena as diverse as oral traditions, family and tribal life, in-group and peer conformity, war, conquest and colonialism, migration, trade and travel, education, religious and clerical practices, the development and spread of printing presses, and more recently modern telecommunications and digital technology. In today’s internet age, the speed of changes and new usages across geography is evident. Along the way, changes reflect both natural evolution and interventions by authorities in the form of royalty, government officials³, clergy, clerisy, media, academia, tech overlords, and elites of all stripes.

The question of evolution vs. corruption, of natural vs. unnatural changes in language, has important insights for modern society far beyond linguistics. Politics⁴, for example, is where linguistic corruption operates most openly and visibly. Political

² Philip Pulella, “Pope Decries Church Conservatives Encased in ‘Suit of Armour,’” Reuters, January 6, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/pope-decries-church-conservatives-encased-suit-armour-2022-01-06/>.

³ In one notable example, Turkish president Kemal Ataturk simply decreed the use of a new Latin-based Turkish alphabet in 1928. The old Arabic alphabet (used in Ottoman Turkish writing) was banished from schools, while mosques were instructed to issue the call to prayer in Turkish rather than Arabic.

⁴ And its incestuous cousin, punditry.

language is used to persuade and inspire — or to a political cynic, to inflame outrage, demonize opponents, and solicit votes or donations. Words and phrase are overused or misused to the point they become meaningless, or even radically redefined (in practice) to mean their opposite. Speech is weaponized, while “linguistic kill shots”⁵ are employed to shut down debate and shift focus to a politician’s personal identity rather than issues.

Economics is not immune from corruption in language. In economic science, speech serves as a variety of action.⁶ Thus we can study language in the context of praxeology, with attendant characteristics like scarcity, economizing, and trade. We would like to perceive language as an expression of spontaneous order, “the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design.”⁷ But economists too, especially those writing for lay audiences or social media, like to use language designed to obscure or persuade rather than inform. Among central bankers, for example, we see “word inflation” happening alongside monetary inflation. Thus we endured the legendary wordiness and opacity of the Maestro Alan Greenspan: “I’m trying to think of a way to answer that question by putting more words into fewer ideas than I usually do.”⁸

Furthermore, public choice theory suggests our understanding of “consent” (in the linguistic, conceptual sense) is badly served through expressions of democratic majorities, even by large supermajorities. The perceived public interest, an important but often unstated goal underlying much of our political rhetoric, is simply an unknowable aggregate of voters’ multitudinous self-interests. As such, “public interest” becomes jargon to be abused by politicians, economists, or bankers to further a goal other than truth.

This essay briefly considers the modern corruption of language in the sphere of political economy and attendant media. Even five years ago, the top-down or centralized force operating to corrupt the language of politics and economics could

⁵ Cartoonist Scott Adams coined this phrase to describe former US president Donald Trump’s skill at labeling political opponents. Alexandra King, “Dilbert’ Creator Scott Adams Calls Out Trump’s ‘Linguistic Kill Shots,’” CNN, November 4, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/04/us/dilbert-smerconish-cnntv/index.html>.

⁶ Daniel W. Hieber, “Praxeology and Language: Social Science as the Study of Human Action,” *History and Philosophy of the Language Sciences* (blog), May 4, 2017, <https://hiphilangsci.net/2017/05/04/praxeology-and-language-social-science-as-the-study-of-human-action/>. Note, however, how viewing speech as a form of action could advance arguments for speech restrictions by states. If words can hurt—like actions—why should such words not be prohibited in the same manner as a slap to the face?

⁷ Adam Ferguson, Adam. *An Essay On The History Of Civil Society*, 5th ed. (London, 1782).

⁸ David Wessel, “Clearly, the Chairman Tries to Obfuscate Or Maybe He Doesn’t,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 23, 1995, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB112404192550712625>.

have been broadly termed “political correctness” (PC). Today the term is obsolete, another example of the rapid (unnatural) evolution of usage in Western society. PC referred more narrowly to acceptable speech, whereas today’s linguistic enforcers seek to impose a whole new mindset, attitude, and way of thinking. Thus, PC has been replaced by an even broader and more amorphous term, “woke.” Woke, whether a slur or not, may be used very broadly to represent strident left progressive beliefs regarding race, sex, sexuality, equality, climate change, and the like. Woke demands ever-changing language, and constantly creates new words while eliminating old ones. As a result, “cancellation,” de-platforming, and loss of employment or standing all loom large, giving pause to speakers and writers who must consider a new woke orthodoxy.⁹

2. ORWELL’S MEANINGLESS WORDS

George Orwell’s famous 1946 essay “Politics and the English Language” is perhaps the single best modern summary of the corruption of language for political ends (although primarily a style and usage guide for writers). Ironically, Orwell himself sought to turn “political writing” into an art, evincing his own desire to shape language for ideological purposes. Note too that the Englishman Orwell wrote this essay not long after the end of World War II, during which time he had worked as a broadcaster for BBC’s Eastern Service creating British propaganda for India to counter Nazi propaganda. So even before his famous political novels *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell was quite familiar with the politicization of language. Politically corrupted language frequently veers into outright propaganda.

Orwell attacks “meaningless words” as a form of corrupted language which is not only intended to obscure the accepted meanings of words, but to actively pervert them in “consciously dishonest ways.” As such, meaningless words become weapons in political combat:

“Many political words are similarly abused. The word Fascism has now no meaning except in so far as it signifies ‘something not desirable’. The words democracy, socialism, freedom, patriotic, realistic, justice, have each of them several different meanings which cannot be reconciled with one another. In the case of a word like democracy, not only is there no agreed definition, but the attempt to make one is resisted from all sides. It is almost universally felt that when we call a country democratic we are praising it: consequently the defenders of every kind of régime claim that it is a democracy, and fear that they might have to stop using that word if it were tied down to any one meaning. Words of this kind are often used in a consciously dishonest way. That is, the person who

⁹ As hate speech laws proliferate across the West, even criminal sanctions must be considered. See Jeremy Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

uses them has his own private definition, but allows his hearer to think he means something quite different. Statements like Marshal Pétain was a true patriot, The Soviet press is the freest in the world, The Catholic Church is opposed to persecution, are almost always made with intent to deceive. Other words used in variable meanings, in most cases more or less dishonestly, are: class, totalitarian, science, progressive, reactionary, bourgeois, equality.”

Surely Orwell was particularly prescient with respect to “fascism” and “democracy,” both of which are wildly overused particularly in western political discourse today. Former U.S. President Donald Trump regularly was termed a fascist (i.e. something not desirable) by the American commentariat, perhaps more than any modern president¹⁰. And what made him so undesirable? He was a threat to democracy, of course. And by democracy, the commentariat meant “voters approving the kind of government and the kind of president we advocate.”

Fascism, despite its different manifestations in the 20th century, is not simply an amorphous word for bad or oppressive government. Its fundamental elements include an authoritarian or unchecked individual ruler; suppressions of political and press freedoms, and a melding of corporate and state power in service of that ruler’s ambitions. All of these elements could be ascribed to any modern US president without too much hyperbole, or to none at all. But the relentless campaign to label Trump as uniquely fascist or even a “Nazi” was unprecedented and based almost entirely on his abrasive personal style rather than his action. Because political and media elites held such deep contempt for Trump as a populist outsider— *the wrong kind of person*— they did not hesitate to corrupt and wildly abuse a term normally associated with Hitler’s atrocities. “Fascism” has become one of Orwell’s meaningless words.

Similarly, a very peculiar “democracy” has become a weaponized shibboleth for political progressives. On the heels of Trump’s 2016 electoral victory, the *Washington Post* breathlessly and ominously added a new slogan to its masthead, “Democracy Dies in Darkness.” The implication was not subtle: democracy exists when the right candidate wins, in this case Hillary Clinton. She was destined to win, destined to become the first female US president, and destined to lead the inexorably progressive American future — a future unburdened by the Deplorables who supported Trump. And yet something went terribly, terribly wrong on that election night in 2016. The wrong candidate won, and so democracy...dies? Suddenly the electoral college,¹¹ a mechanism purposely built into the US Constitution as a compromise between election

¹⁰ See Dylan Matthews, “The F Word,” Vox, January 14, 2021, <https://www.vox.com/22225472/fascism-definition-trump-fascist-examples>.

¹¹ See Darrell M. West, It’s Time to Abolish the Electoral College, Big Ideas, Policy 2020, Brookings Institute, October 15, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/policy2020/bigideas/its-time-to-abolish-the-electoral-college/>.

of a president by Congress or by popular vote, was an unconscionable evil. Trump's victory was due solely to this antiquated and antidemocratic system, not to mention election interference by the Russians! The endless references to democracy as a sacred part of American politics, a holy rite defiled by Trump's victory, was a remarkable example of the naked corruption of political language in service of a narrative.

The U.K. press and political classes reacted much the same with respect to the Brexit vote¹², bemoaning the “threat to democracy” posed by those who even dared hold such a referendum. When “Leave” carried the day, to the shock of pollsters and pundits¹³, they declared something surely must be wrong with British democracy! Never mind the very high turnout (more than 72% of registered voters) and comfortable 3% margin of victory – over one million votes. British journalists (not to mention the absolutely bewildered European media) simply could not believe the result. Concentrated in London, which voted heavily against Brexit, many scribes knew almost nobody who voted to leave – just as millions of US progressives in blue cities seemingly did not know even one of the 62 million Trump voters in 2016.

Because Little Englanders were an afterthought for Remainers, and because the deep divide between young, urban voters and old, rural voters was so stark, the psychological shock of the result demanded an explanation. And this shock required a coping mechanism, since democracy *per se* can never be blamed (or blameworthy). Thus, there was a rush to label Brexit “anti-democratic” and blame shadowy tech influences for the outcome. It simply was not possible that a clear majority of Britons wanted out of the EU and voted fair and square to leave; something more sinister must be afoot. So rather than scapegoat democracy itself, and despite plainly losing a legitimate popular referendum to the Leave forces, politicians and media chose to double down and use language in consciously dishonest ways.

Orwell's reference to “equality” as a meaningless word is another example of his canny foreshadowing of a future trend. Orwell lists it among words “used in variable meanings, in most cases more or less dishonestly.” It is precisely this corrupting dishonesty that weaponizes a word like equality away from its plain or widely accepted meaning. In the West, at least, the term means “the status of being equal” with respect to status, rights, and opportunities. This implies fair and equal *treatment* under law, and the right to pursue *opportunities* regardless of personal characteristics or the

¹² Jon Henley, “‘A Threat to Democracy’: How Europe's Media Reacted to UK's Plan to Renege on Brexit Deal,” *Guardian* (US edition), September 13, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/sep/13/a-threat-to-democracy-how-europe-media-reacted-to-uk-plan-to-renege-on-brex-it-deal>.

¹³ Pamela Duncan, “How the Pollsters Got it Wrong on the EU Referendum,” *Guardian* (US edition), June 24, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/24/how-eu-referendum-pollsters-wrong-opinion-predict-close>.

circumstances of one's birth. But equality does not imply any guarantee of happiness or outcomes or a certain level of material wealth. It also does not imply a political solution to life's unfairness, with respect to intelligence, looks, talent, or simple good fortune.

This is precisely why politicians have seized upon the word "equity" as a pivot to reanimate what they see as a stalled strategy for their redistributionist goals. An old, tired word is tossed out for a fresh new variant, with the meaning twisted to serve a new political shibboleth.

Both equality and equity share the Latin root "aequus," meaning fair, even, or equal. Merriam-Webster dictionary still defines equity the old-fashioned way, as "fairness or justice in the way people are treated." But in today's politics equity is a loaded word, so full of ideological connotations as to render its common definition obsolete. Consider its generous use by US Vice President Kamala Harris, who made equity a cornerstone of her 2020 campaign. "There is a big difference," she informs us, "between equality and equity."¹⁴ In Harris's telling, equity gives people from different backgrounds the "resources and support they need" to "compete on equal footing." As a result, equitable treatment means *we all end up at the same place* (italics added).

Equity, then, is reimagined and redefined as a euphemism for equal outcomes—a significant shift from the suddenly outdated concepts of opportunity and fairness. Again, in the political reformulation of words one meaning is lost and a new one is imposed. Therefore, we are subjected to press releases from the Biden/Harris administration with grand pronouncements:

"Today, President Biden signed an Executive Order on the White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity for Black Americans. This is just the latest action taken by President Biden and Vice President Harris to tackle systemic racism and make investments to rebuild our economy and our social safety net so all people, including Black Americans, can thrive. *Already, the Administration has delivered generation-defining outcomes for Black Americans*"¹⁵ (italics added).

¹⁴ Kamala Harris (@KamalaHarris), "There's a big difference between equality and equity," Twitter, November 1, 2020, 12:06 p.m., <https://twitter.com/kamalaharris/status/1322963321994289154?lang=en>.

¹⁵ Briefing Room, "FACT SHEET: The Biden-Harris Administration Advances Equity and Opportunity for Black People and Communities across the Country," White House (website), October 19, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/10/19/fact-sheet-the-biden-harris-administration-advances-equity-and-opportunity-for-black-people-and-communities-across-the-country/>.

The Heritage Foundation explains this subtle but profound shift in usage from equality to equity in the Biden administration order:¹⁶

“Equity,” by the way, appears 21 times, while that old American mainstay of “equality” doesn’t even make a cameo. And there lies an important rub.

“Equity has now come to mean the functional opposite of equality. The latter means equal treatment to all citizens, such as the Constitution calls for in the clause of the 14th Amendment that deals with equal protection of laws. Equity means treating Americans unequally to ensure that outcomes are equalized—the old tried (and failed) Marxian standard.

The order defines the term -equity, but it isn’t forthright about whether it’s equality of opportunity or outcomes. It says “‘equity’ means the consistent and systematic fair, just and -impartial treatment of all individuals.” Thus, everything turns on how administrators interpret the meaning of “fair” and “just.” It will likely be a “woke” interpretation, considering the definition’s exhaustive inclusion of every victim category under the sun (“underserved communities that have been denied such treatment, such as black, Latino and Indigenous and Native American persons, Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders and other persons of color.”). This usual list even includes ‘persons who live in rural areas’ —a nod, one supposes, to the left’s new awareness of its vulnerability there.”

Vice President Kamala Harris was much more forthcoming and honest when she tweeted this on Nov. 1: “Equality suggests, ‘Everyone should get the same amount.’ The problem with that, not everybody’s starting out from the same place. So, if we’re all getting the same amount, but you started out back there and I started out over here, we could get the same amount, but you’re still going to be that far back behind me.”

To understand the shift from equality to equity as an operative political phrase, we need look no further than the agenda being advanced. Kamala Harris seeks to redefine and amplify equity conceptually as part of a concerted effort to effect change in society through diction. Speech becomes political action. Equity is simply a recent and poignant example of how a plain, ordinary word becomes corrupted into one of Orwell’s meaningless words and then repurposed. It is now laden with the weight of a distinctly political agenda. As with Orwell’s barnyard animals, we are all equitable now—but some among us are more equitable than others.

¹⁶ Mike Gonzalez, “Biden’s Embrace of ‘Equity’ Means He’s Abandoned the Quest for Equality,” Heritage Foundation, February 2, 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/progressivism/commentary/bidens-embrace-equity-means-hes-abandoned-the-quest-equality>.

3. HAYEK'S MIRAGE

While Orwell so thoroughly explained how words are stripped of meaning and implicitly redefined, economist and political theorist Friedrich Hayek's understanding of language helped explain the more explicit and outright commandeering of language we face today. Like Orwell, Hayek was prescient about the corruption of language to serve political ends — and in fact foretold what would become the modern political orthodoxy termed “social justice.”

In the second of Hayek's three-volume book *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*¹⁷, he presents social justice as a concept so amorphous, and so fraught with peril for any legal system (i.e., a system at least ostensibly charged with producing civil and criminal justice), that its adoption as a goal for society necessarily misdirects even the most well-meaning goals. Social justice perverts an *individualized* legal concept into a politicized, amorphous, and wholly collective social concept. As such, it necessarily threatens freedom for individuals and perverts the law:

“The classical demand is that the state ought to treat all people equally in spite of the fact that they are very unequal. You can't deduce from this that because people are unequal you ought to treat them unequally in order to make them equal. And that's what social justice amounts to. It's a demand that the state should treat people differently in order to place them in the same position. . . . To make people equal a goal of governmental policy would force government to treat people very unequally indeed.”

Hayek's conception of social justice centers primarily around the material or economic distribution of wealth, termed “distributive justice.” In his critique, any notion of distributive justice makes sense only within a context of centrally planned distribution of economic goods. In a market economy, by contrast, there is no process of distribution separate from production. But even the most well-meaning central planners, Hayek contends, cannot produce a socially “just” distribution of material goods.

Today's social justice movement, by contrast, (perhaps) focuses less on wealth and more on identity (race, sex, sexuality, gender, disability) and perceived ill treatment of marginalized groups. But in both cases the undefinable and unattainable goal of achieving social justice relies on state action. The term is used expressly to promote political measures, or as Hayek puts it, for the “conquest of public imagination”:

“The appeal to 'social justice' has nevertheless by now become the most widely used and most effective argument in political discussion. Almost every claim for government action on behalf of particular groups is advanced in its name, and if it can be made to appear

¹⁷ F. A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973-79).

that a certain measure is demanded by 'social justice', opposition to it will rapidly weaken. People may dispute whether or not the particular measure is required by 'social justice'. But that this is the standard which ought to guide political action, and that the expression has a definite meaning, is hardly ever questioned. In consequence, there are today probably no political movements or politicians who do not readily appeal to 'social justice' in support of the particular measures which they advocate.

It also can scarcely be denied that the demand for 'social justice' has already in a great measure transformed the social order and is continuing to transform it in a direction which those who called for it never foresaw. Though the phrase has undoubtedly helped occasionally to make the law more equal for all, whether the demand for justice in distribution has in any sense made society juster or reduced discontent must remain doubtful.

The expression of course described from the beginning the aspirations which were at the heart of socialism.”

Social justice, an all-encompassing concept which is both undefinable and unattainable, nevertheless is the animating feature of political rhetoric in 2022. Its ever-changing lexicon presents words as empty vessels to be filled with the latest political meaning, moving from jargon into outright propaganda. Words are stripped of meaning and redefined, but subtly and using subterfuge. By contrast, today's social justice movement encourages the overt, active redefinition of words.

Consider the simple but loaded term “racism,” which in common parlance meant hatred for a particular race or an irrational belief in the inherent superiority or inferiority of a particular race. Just two years ago, Merriam-Webster's dictionary reflected this widely held view:

a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race.”

a: doctrine or political program based on the assumption of racism and designed to execute its principles

b: a political or social system founded on racism racial prejudice or discrimination.

But in the wake of Black Lives Matter protests across America following the killing of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Merriam-Webster's editors bowed to pressure from activists to change the entry to insert an overtly political additional definition¹⁸:

the systemic oppression of a racial group to the social, economic, and political advantage of another.

¹⁸ Cristina Goerdt, “Why Merriam-Webster Changed the Definition of Racism,” VOA, June 16, 2020, https://www.voanews.com/a/student-union_why-merriam-webster-changed-definition-racism/6191215.html.

Not content to stop there, the US Anti-Defamation League goes a step further it its new definition of racism and gets to the heart of things by naming the oppressors:

the marginalization and/or oppression of people of color based on a socially constructed racial hierarchy that privileges White people.

Thus, with a few short words an entirely new edifice is constructed: racism is “systemic” and inescapable. One group executes and perpetuates racial oppression; its members cannot be above it or immune to it. All are guilty and in need of corrective action. Racism no longer is manifest as harmful actions or even harmful thoughts, but, instead, represents a wholesale social, economic, and political reality. Our entire society is rooted in racial hierarchy, a construct which benefits whites only and must be rooted out through an active political program. This starts with an outright redefinition of racism, down to the dictionary level as taught to schoolchildren. There is no pretense of natural evolution of language, but rather an insistence that words and definitions must change to satisfy our new enlightened understanding. Anyone who objects, or notices how the new definition tends to benefit one political party or movement, clearly stands in the way of racial progress through their unwillingness to accede to the new linguistic tools of anti-oppression; never mind if only a small minority demanded or agreed to the change. This is Hayek’s unattainable mirage in action: social justice is achieved through anti-racism, which requires new thinking and new words. Racism, once a sin of the individual heart, is repositioned as inherent and omnipresent and inherent in our society — addressable only by political programs. Corruption of language is part of the agenda.

Even beyond radical redefinitions, social justice requires brand new words to express brand new concepts — and to break with the “old,” oppressive language of two years ago. The transgender movement stands out for its rapid success in creating entirely new words which are quickly added to our vocabulary. Among the most widely used is “cisgender,” an amalgamation of the Latin prefix “cis” — derived as “on this side of” — and gender, a term which until the last few decades was used mostly in the context of grammar. Merriam-Webster’s dictionary added this brand-new word only in 2017.¹⁹ But even “transgender” is a fairly new term, replacing the older “transsexual” in the 1970s.²⁰ Transgender people, in keeping with their prefix, cross over and go beyond their assigned birth sex in a variety of ways. Cisgender people, by contrast, stay on their side of the sexual aisle, so to speak — remaining identified with their assigned genitalia

¹⁹ “What Does ‘Cisgender’ Mean,” Words We’re Watching, Merriam-Webster (website), accessed March 2, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/cisgender-meaning>.

²⁰ Stephen Whittle, “A Brief History of Transgender Issues,” *Guardian* (US edition), June 2, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2010/jun/02/brief-history-transgender-issues>.

and chromosomes. Embedded in cisgender is the implication that those who do not consider changing genders are making a conscious choice to remain as they are, which in turn implies one's sex is chosen rather than biologically determined. Thus cisgender represents an important conceptual shift: those identifying with their birth sex, an overwhelming statistical majority, now have a specific label for their identification to match the older trans identification. "Cis" is no longer an assumed default status with no need of explanation or nomenclature. And while trans activists surely cheer this, theirs has been a concerted effort to change language for political ends rather than any natural evolution. This phenomenon is even more pronounced with trans pronouns and acronyms, where terminology changes are imposed so quickly that they almost seem to be aimed at demoralization of the benighted older generations. "LGBT," for example, is now **LGBTQQIP2SAA**: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, queer, intersex, pansexual, two-spirit (2S), androgynous, and asexual. With new letters, new genders, and new sexualities added to the trans vocabulary frequently, the effect is disorienting even as presented by proponents as simple equality and fairness in language:

"Some languages, such as English, do not have a gender neutral or third gender pronoun available, and this has been criticized, since in many instances, writers, speakers, etc. use "he/his" when referring to a generic individual in the third person. Also, the dichotomy of "he and she" in English does not leave room for other gender identities, which is a source of frustration to the transgender and gender queer communities"²¹.

This push to remake English grammar in service of the trans movement produces a dizzying array of new pronouns:

HE/SHE	HIM/HER	HIS/HER	HIS/HERS	HIMSELF/HERSELF
zie	zim	zir	zis	zieself
sie	sie	hir	hirs	hirself
ey	em	eir	eirs	eirself
ve	ver	vis	vers	verself
tey	ter	tem	ters	terself
e	em	eir	eirs	emself

Along with pronouns, a host of new and quite precise nouns is required to distinguish the flowering of newly recognized sexualities:

²¹ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer Plus (LGBTQ+) Resource Center, "Gender Pronouns," University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, accessed March 2, 2021, <https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/>.

Aromantic, Alloromantic, Agender, Asexual, Sex-repulsed, Cupiosexual, Greysexual, Greyromantic, Omnisexual, Trans feminine, Trans masculine, Demiboy, Demigirl, Bigender, Allosexual, Heteronormative, Amatonormative, Polysexual, Pangender, Compulsory heterosexuality, Abrosexual, Gender nonconforming, Ceterosexual, Demiromantic, Biromantic, Autosexual, Heterosexual, Gay, Lesbian, Queer, LGBTQ+, Bisexual, and Pansexual.”

The point here is not to mock or shake our heads at these unfamiliar words, but rather to understand the new trans lexicon as an overtly political imposition of language. Even the most ardent trans advocate does not really expect average people to adopt and keep up with all the new terms; they are weapons wielded to demand respect for and acquiescence to the new sexual landscape. Writers and speakers, especially older people, who fumble with the bewildering new rules can be attacked as misgendering or disrespecting trans people. *The goal of the new language is not better communication or greater understanding, but to impose a new way of thinking about our most basic human biology and identity.* On the linguistic end of this campaign, at least, English speakers were never asked if they agreed to this.

If Hayek was correct about the mirage of social justice, a top-down imposed attempt at linguistic justice is equally fraught with peril. Hayek imagined economics, like language, as a *cosmos* — ordering itself and changing over time but not deliberately designed by humans. It is a self-ordering system. The drive toward *taxis*, or organized arrangement, comes from agencies or people outside the linguistic order — exogenous and imposed.²² Social justice language is a clear example of the latter. By corrupting language, it attempts to create a mirage of justice which is undefinable, unattainable, and ultimately cynical in its (real) goal of political control.

4. WOKE CEOS AND CENTRAL BANKERS

The imposition or corruption of language for political gain certainly is not limited to the traditionally leftwing arenas of academia or think tanks or social justice organizations, however. In 2022 the use of woke language, in service of unquestioned progressive goals (diversity, inclusion, equity, social justice, fighting climate change, etc.), is fully embraced even by the historically conservative worlds of big corporations and banking. And this embrace goes beyond lip service to causes or platitudes in press releases by expressly reshaping the policies pursued by those companies and banks.

²² F. A. Hayek, *The Confusion of Language in Political Thought, with Some Suggestions for Remediating It* (London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 1968), <http://iea.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/files/upldbook508.pdf>.

Many of the largest tech and retail companies in the world²³, for example, publicly supported the Black Lives Matter movement and pledged billions²⁴ in funding to its cause. With this support comes vague and open-ended language, as with this missive from a Walmart CEO to employees concerning a new center for racial equity being created by the retail giant:

"We will seek to advance economic opportunity and healthier living, including issues surrounding the social determinants of health, strengthening workforce development and related educational systems, and support criminal justice reform with an emphasis on examining barriers to opportunity faced by those exiting the system."

Two questions arise: First, is the job of Walmart to sell retail goods for a profit or to cure racial injustice in the world? Second, why has the company departed from any time-honored definition of racism? Why create a "center" with goals unrelated to its core business? Surely the best way for Walmart to combat racism in society is to hire and promote blacks or enrich black owners of its stock through higher profits. Why does Walmart, one of the biggest and most politically powerful corporations on the planet, rush to embrace the wildly overbroad language of systemic racism and sinister "barriers to opportunity"? The true barrier for most is poverty, which is far better addressed by economic opportunity — like a job at Walmart — than kowtowing to the linguistic demands of social justice.

One woman's clothing company called "Spanx," whose decidedly unwoke business model (like the girdle manufacturers of yesteryear) centers around making its wearers appear slimmer, trots out several buzzwords in this social media post:

Today, we're using our social platforms to reiterate that we are committed to being a better ally to fight systemic racism. We will actively practice anti-racism through awareness and education, self-introspection and action.²⁵

This use of "systemic" effectively eliminates any possibility that a member of an oppressor group might *not* be racist as an individual, because racism is all around us *as a system*—like the proverbial goldfish, we are swimming in it yet not even aware of the

²³ Mercey Livingston, "These Are the Major Brands Donating to the Black Lives Matter Movement," CNET, June 16, 2020, <https://www.cnet.com/how-to/companies-donating-black-lives-matter/>.

²⁴ Tracy Jan, Jena McGregor, and Meghan Hoyer, "Corporate America's \$50 Billion Promise," *Washington Post*, August 23, 2021, updated August 24, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/interactive/2021/george-floyd-corporate-america-racial-justice/>.

²⁵ Spanx, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor," Instagram photo, May 31, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/CA3vAObHmZ3/?utm_source=ig_embed&ig_rid=8149af21-0a58-48f7-b440-a9d8d034ffb3.

water. This implies or even demands an obligation for everyone, regardless of one's own personal lack of racist prejudice, to combat the problem. "Ally" is code for a progressive in good standing, a member of the oppressor identity class who at least holds the correct leftwing views and conforms to the current linguistic vogue. "Anti-racism" likewise requires the active participation of all, at the very least to become educated and aware (unlearn and recognize our problematic views) and then act. Merely not being racist, or not acting racist, is not enough under the new language surrounding race. *The imposed words contain their own admonitions and exhortations.*

Of course, big corporations have an economic interest in being seen as socially conscious from a publicity perspective, as it presumably helps their bottom-line profitability in the long run. The old adage "do well by doing good" certainly is at work here. But something profound has shifted, especially among the younger corporate workforce that tends to dominate marketing departments and run social media accounts. Younger workers are so steeped in the progressive worldview they no longer see blatantly political corruptions of language as political at all — caring about climate change, for example, is simply what a good person does. Those who don't care, or worse yet challenge the orthodoxy of climate change politics, are simply retrograde and beyond redemption. Likewise, anyone who might deny the loaded and quite political assertion that America is a deeply racist country, uniquely born out of subjugation, is utterly incomprehensible, and clearly a bad person. Climate "deniers" (likening them to Holocaust deniers) and racists are not wanted as customers. They can buy their groceries and shapewear bodysuits somewhere else.

Central bankers too, like their corporate counterparts, have immersed themselves in the new top-down language of the progressive imposers. This may seem unlikely. Monetary policy for decades was that most staid and inscrutable corner of economics, a boring specialty even among the most wonkish professional economists. Former Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan, nicknamed "The Undertaker" for his reserved demeanor by novelist Ayn Rand during his time in her social circles, was the old archetype of a central banker. He was infamous for his opaque "Fedspeak" at public hearings, uttering lots of dense words but essentially saying nothing (market players hung on his every pronouncement and he wanted to avoid misinterpretation). His boring appearances and testimony during the 1990s, always technical and dry, suggested anything but progressive or politicized ambitions for monetary policy.

The Fed, after all, has a purely economic function: to promote a strong U.S. economy through its control over the dollar and domestic monetary policy. Its dual mandate from Congress is to foster economic conditions that achieve both stable prices

and maximum sustainable employment²⁶. We are reminded constantly about its vaunted nonpolitical and nonpartisan independence, which requires its governors to act without regard to politics²⁷ or outside influence.

Yet today’s central bankers, including and especially those at the US Fed, cannot escape the demands of progressive language czars. The Fed may be independent of presidents and Congress, but it is not at all immune from the broader political, social, and cultural pressure to advance an allegedly egalitarian agenda. That environment has a new vocabulary, one that central bankers are readily adopting. Consider this recent announcement from the US central bank:



Here we see a host of undefined and undefinable buzz words relating to the (assumed, undefined) problem of economic inequality between the sexes in the US economy. “Gender” substitutes for the more definable “sex”, even though the real thrust of the conference is to address issues relating to women. And the laughably vague “evidence-based strategies” implies alternatives like “wishful strategies” or “unproven strategies.” “Inclusive,” an overused shibboleth word among woke cognoscenti, is here used to mean “more inclusive for women,” which excludes half of the population. This is an overtly political conference, held to further feminist concerns rather than monetary policy concerns.

²⁶ “The Federal Reserve’s Dual Mandate,” Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, last updated October 20, 2020, <https://www.chicagofed.org/research/dual-mandate/dual-mandate>.

²⁷ “Why Is It Important to Separate Federal Reserve Monetary Policy Decisions from Political Influence?,” Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, last updated December 31, 2019, <https://www.federalreserve.gov/faqs/why-is-it-important-to-separate-federal-reserve-monetary-policy-decisions-from-political-influence.htm>.

One panel of American academics at this 2019 ECB conference for central bankers considered the question of gender (sex) at economics seminars²⁸—again applying a feminist lens to their role in banking:

Gender and the Dynamics of Economics Seminars

A distinctively aggressive culture pervades the seminars at which economists present their work. This study codes the interactions between speakers and their audiences at several hundred seminars and shows that women speakers have a greater share of their seminar time taken up by audience members and are more likely to be asked questions that are considered hostile.

Another highly politicized issue, namely climate change, is also now part and parcel of central bank messaging campaigns. The supposed risks of unchecked carbon emissions and rising temperatures — two areas where Wharton and Harvard finance PhDs might not be expected to possess expertise — are now part of the “non-monetary policy steps” central banks around the world must consider:²⁹

“While governments are in the driving seat when it comes to climate policies, within our mandates we as central bankers and supervisors have a key role to play. Let me be clear: we are acting in the pursuit of, not in spite of, our mandates. This is our duty, not an option.”

And this new role comes with new pious language:

The growth of sustainable finance (the integration of environmental, social, and governance criteria into investment decisions) across all asset classes shows the increasing importance that investors attribute to climate change, among other nonfinancial considerations... Sustainable finance can contribute to climate change mitigation by providing incentives for firms to adopt less carbon-intensive technologies and specifically financing the development of new technologies. Channels through which investors can achieve this goal include engaging with company management, advocating for low-carbon strategies as investor activists, and lending to firms that are leading in regard to sustainability. All these actions send price signals, directly and indirectly, in the allocation of capital.”

²⁸ Pascaline Dupas, Alicia Modestino, Muriel Niederle, and Justin Wolfers, “Gender and the Dynamic of Economic Seminars” (paper presented at the Joint Bank of England, Federal Reserve Board, and European Central Bank conference, Frankfurt am Main, Germany, October 21, 2019), https://www.ecb.europa.eu/pub/conferences/html/20191021_2nd_gender_conference.en.html.

²⁹ Frank Elderson, “The Role of Supervisors and Central Banks in the Climate Crisis,” (keynote speech at the 31st Lisbon meeting between the central banks of Portuguese-speaking countries, Frankfurt am Main, Germany, October 19, 2021), <https://www.bankingsupervision.europa.eu/press/speeches/date/2021/html/ssm.sp211019~90a7c4dd5a.en.html>.

What exactly, is “sustainable” finance in this context? Does it mean business practices and corporate governance that will allow the planet to remain habitable another 100, 1000, 10,000 years? And what does “less carbon-intensive” mean for billions of shivering or sweltering or starving or simply fossil fuel reliant denizens of the planet right now? More importantly, how did environmentalism become part of a central bank’s mandate?

These departures from traditional monetary concerns at the expense of the economy have not gone unnoticed, even by former US Treasury Secretary and onetime Harvard University president Lawrence Summers³⁰:

“We have a generation of central bankers who are defining themselves by their wokeness,” Summers, who is now a professor at Harvard University, said on Wednesday. “They’re defining themselves by how socially concerned they are... “We’re in more danger than we’ve been during my career of losing control of inflation in the U.S.”

The shift in language among central bankers mirrors their shift in focus, from purely economic and monetary matters into openly political movements. Central bankers, in keeping with the movements they embrace, have adopted the nomenclature (and agenda) of the woke.

5. CONCLUSION: WHY CORRUPTED LANGUAGE MATTERS

Across the West we are bombarded by what author Ken Smith called “Junk English”³¹:

“Junk English is much more than sloppy grammar. It is a hash of human frailties and cultural license: spurning the language of the educated yet spawning its own pretentious words and phrases, favoring appearance over substance, broadness over precision, and loudness above all. It is sometimes innocent, sometimes lazy, sometimes well intended.”

Corrupted language, in fact, is rarely innocent or well-intended. It is frequently pretentious and takes unearned license. It feigns academic pretense, even when at its most base level of jingoism. It is loud, demanding, and has a very simple and obvious purpose: to achieve ideological or political ends. Corrupted language often veers into propaganda.

³⁰ Rich Miller, “Summers Slams Woke Fed for Risking Losing Control of Inflation,” Bloomberg | Quint, October 13, 2021, last updated October 14, 2021,

<https://www.bloombergquint.com/global-economics/summers-slams-woke-fed-for-risking-losing-control-of-inflation>.

³¹ Ken Smith, *Junk English* (New York: Blast Books, 2001).

How and why language changes over time is enormously complex and obviously well beyond the scope of any essay. But when change is imposed by design, in furtherance of an agenda, we should strive to recognize it—regardless of whether we agree with that agenda. We should study and understand the distinction between the natural evolution of language over time and the imposition of politicized diction or usage through coordinated and intentional efforts.

Social scientists of all disciplines, not just linguists, should care about the corruption of language since it shapes our understanding of all human interactions. It is an important subject for interdisciplinary study, and could yield new knowledge in economics, political science, sociology, law, and philosophy. Lay people similarly should care about the corruption of language to better understand its role in political manipulation.

In economics, particularly the Austrian school, language is an important subfield of praxeology and “not simply a collection of phonetic signs.”³² Thus it represents “an instrument of thinking and acting,” as Ludwig von Mises termed it.³³ Language is an important component of an individual’s means-ends reasoning, important in Austrian methodology. Economic axioms and logical deductions made from them require precision and agreement in language. And we can see a parallel between imposed language and economic interventionism, vs. evolved language and laissez-faire policies. Hayek posits that markets are spontaneous and evolve, requiring no bureaucracy or elite central planners. Economists would benefit from considering a similar conception of planned vs. spontaneous language.

Philosophy surely ought to demand precise language, particularly in epistemology. Justifications for knowledge claims rely on truth, evidence, and belief. These concepts in turn require common language to express and define them. We might think of words and phrase in philosophy like units of measurement or force in the physical sciences. An inch is an inch, a gallon is a gallon, gravity is gravity—but as we have seen, “democracy”, “justice”, and “equity” are far less precise. Relatively static definitions and meanings, which evolve only slowly over time, give coherence to philosophy.

In law, the question of evolution vs. corruption is akin to the differences between common law and positive (statutory, legislative) law. Law, like language, has a process. Common law develops from a natural evolutionary process — rooted in custom, tradition, and notions of fairness, while bound up with local and temporal attributes. Historically, legal justice is specific and individualized, not general and societal. Positive law, by contrast, is designed by a central authority. It can change radically and

³² Hieber, “Praxeology and Language”

³³ Ludwig von Mises, *Theory and History: An Interpretation of Social and Economic Evolution* (1985; repr., Auburn, AL: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2007).

dramatically overnight; a new law can be imposed immediately and result in very different forms of justice than previously obtained. For lawmakers, judges, and lawyers, words are the brick and mortar of their profession. And just as “justice” itself has become one of Orwell’s meaningless words, our entire legal system and doctrines rely on potentially corrupted language.

Even mathematics, that most objective science with its own numerical and symbolic language, cannot be explained conceptually without using words. And we should not imagine that imposed language is only a phenomenon in more left-leaning social sciences and academic departments as opposed to physical sciences and math.³⁴

Ultimately, imposed language attempts to control our *actions*. When we broadly consider politically correct or woke worldviews — i.e. an activist mindset concerned with promoting amorphous social justice — the linguistic element is straightforward:

“Political correctness is the conscious, designed manipulation of language intended to change the way people speak, write, think, feel, and act, in furtherance of an agenda.”³⁵

Words are just a means to an end, the end being actual changes in how we live our lives. Those changes flow first from our thoughts (and even how we formulate our thoughts), then to our issued words (spoken or written), and ultimately to our actions. The examples provided in this essay make this clear; there is no clear dividing line between language and action, between our thoughts, words, and acts. All are interrelated, and those seeking to impose language understand this.

Who owns and controls language? Ideally, governments, politicians, academics, think tanks, journalists, religious leaders, or elite institutions should not possess this tremendous power. Like market processes, language should evolve without centralized design or control. Only this natural evolution, across time and geography, can reveal the preferences of actual language speakers in any society. Evolution is just; evolution is efficient. But language is an institution, and like any institution is it subject to corruption and even capture by those with political agendas. This essay urges greater awareness and understanding of the distinction between evolution and corruption, between spontaneous linguistic changes and the imposition of language to serve an agenda.

³⁴ Dan Hannan, “Wokeness Is Making War on Science—and Even Math,” *Washington Examiner*, May 24, 2021, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/wokeness-is-making-war-on-science-and-even-math>.

³⁵ Jeff Deist, “PC Is about Control, Not Etiquette,” *Austrian*, November-December 2015, <https://mises.org/library/pc-about-control-not-etiquette-0>.