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Controlling People Through Language

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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While in England traveling with a British friend, I was speaking to a cashier at a railway station when I was dumbstruck by the look of frightened amazement on the woman's face at my use of the word "passenger." Seeing my perplexity, my friend explained: "We don't use that word in Britain. Railway employees are on strict orders to say 'client' instead of 'passenger.'"

In that sense, the privatized British railway differs from the Russian and French where they still remember that transportation exists not for "providing services to customers," but for the very specific and mundane purpose of transporting passengers. But the new "Corporatese" is popping up everywhere. A journalist who asked me to comment on the new health-care bill phrased her question in that same annoying way: "In your opinion, how does that document influence the availability of medical services?"

"What medical services are you talking about?" I snapped. "You mean 'medical assistance.' Services are when I buy something I want at the market. But when a person has a heart attack or a broken leg, he doesn't need services. He needs assistance."

There are many examples like this. The new vocabulary hides behind the mask of political correctness, although it long ago lost any connection to it. Thirty years ago in the United States, people started to clean the language of racist and stereotypical terms that were offensive to women and minorities. In this way, they hoped to create a culture of equality and tolerance. It was a noble goal that never went beyond the level of language. The social problems themselves did not improve.

Worse, by fiddling with the language, participants in the debate increasingly lost sight of the goal and became mired in a discussion of linguistics. Meanwhile, the social aspect of the problems was regarded as taboo.

Market reforms have given rise to new revisions of the language. The content and meaning of all personal activities are now expressed in terms of buying and selling, providing services or upholding contractual obligations. We are witnessing the systematic dehumanization of the language, with the individual reduced to nothing but a consumer in the market system.

Totalitarian regimes of the 20th century showed that control of the language is one element in maintaining control over the people. Deprived of an adequate complement of words, the people are unable to express thoughts contrary to the standards imposed on them and become helpless and easily managed. Even if they are unhappy or dissatisfied with conditions, they are unable to put that discontent into words, much less actions. Control is more easily maintained at the linguistic level than through police repression and brute force.

In British writer George Orwell's anti-Utopian book "1984," this new language was called Newspeak. Fortunately, much has changed since 1984. The Soviet Union and other totalitarian regimes are gone, but not the totalitarian methods of exercising control over the people. The fewer options the ruling regime has of achieving sweeping political control, the more it will resort to indirect methods of control, such as the manipulation of language, to preserve the existing order.

The best, albeit banal, defense against this insidious weapon is to speak the plain truth as much as possible.

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