Stanley Fish
NYT
May 6, 2007, 8:41 pm
The All-Spin Zone
http://fish.blogs.nytimes.com/?p=47

When Aristotle comes to the topic of style and persuasion in Book 3 of his "Rhetoric," he draws back in distaste from a subject he considers "vulgar" and "unworthy." The only reason I am talking about this stuff, he says, is because men are so susceptible to artfully devised appearances. In the best of all possible worlds we would "fight our case with no help beyond the bare facts," for after all, "nothing should matter except the proof of those facts."

Unfortunately, Aristotle laments, both our political institutions and the citizens who populate them are "corrupted" by passion and partisan zeal, with the result that the manner of delivery counts more than the thought that is being delivered. It is therefore necessary to catalog the devices by means of which audiences are "charmed" rather than truly enlightened. We must know these base arts, Aristotle asserts, so that we will not be defenseless against those who deploy them in an effort to deceive us and turn us away from the truth.

Aristotle's "Rhetoric" may be the first, but is certainly not the last treatise that performs the double task of instructing us in the ways of deception and explaining (regretfully) why such instruction is necessary. The Romans Cicero and Quintilian took up the same task, and they were followed by countless manuals of rhetoric produced in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the 18th and 19th centuries and down to the present day. A short version of the genre – George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" – has been particularly influential and is still often cited 60 years after its publication.

And now in 2007 comes "unSpun," by Brooks Jackson and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. The book's subtitle tells it all: "Finding Facts in a World of Disinformation." Once again (for the umpteen-thousandth time) we are given a report on the sorry state of things linguistic – "We live in a world of spin" – and a promise that help is on the way, in this case in the form of a few brief precepts employed as section headings: "Check Primary Sources," "Know What Counts," "Know Who's Talking," "Cross-check Everything That Matters," "Be Skeptical, But Not Cynical." The idea is that while "we humans aren't wired to think very rationally" and are prone to

“letting language do our thinking for us,” we can nevertheless become “more aware of how and when language is steering us toward a conclusion.” In this way, Brooks and Jamieson promise, we can learn “how to avoid the psychological pitfalls that lead us to ignore facts or believe bad information.”

It all sounds so – well – rational: There’s a world of fact out there waiting to be accurately perceived, but the distorting power of words, abetted by the psychological disorders of passion and bias, tends to obscure it and lead us astray. And the remedy? Watch your words and watch your mental processes, paying particular attention to your “existing beliefs” lest they “reject evidence that challenges them.” In short, Jackson and Jamieson recommend, “practice active open-mindedness.”

But some of their examples suggest that active open-mindedness (even if it could be practiced, and I don’t think it could) may not be enough. The first example in the book of the spin you should be able to see through if you are sufficiently alert is a 2006 statement by Karl Rove to the effect that “Real disposable income has risen almost 14 percent since President Bush took office.” Jackson and Jamieson regard this claim as “so divorced from reality as to seem unhinged.” Why? Because the real disposable income Rove cited “was a statistic that measures the total increase in income, not how that income is distributed.” That is to say, the 14-percent increase did not benefit everyone, but went largely “to those in the upper half of society”; the disposable income of the lower half had “fallen by 3.6 percent.”

Does this prove spin? I don’t think so. What it proves is that in Rove’s view, the health of the economy is to be gauged by looking at how big investors and property owners are doing, while in Jackson’s and Jamieson’s view, an economy is not healthy unless the fruits of its growth are widely shared. This is a real difference, but it is a difference in beliefs about what conditions must obtain if an economy is to be pronounced healthy. It is not a difference between a clear-eyed view of the matter and a view colored by a partisan agenda. If the question of fact is “do we have a healthy economy?” there are no independent bits of evidence that can tip the scale in favor of a “yes” or “no,” because the evidence put forward by either side will only be evidence in the light of economic beliefs that are structuring the arena of assessment. Those beliefs (roughly, “trickle down” and “spread the wealth”) tell you what the relevant evidence is and what it is evidence of. But they are not judged by the evidence; they generate it.

When Jackson and Jamieson declare that Rove's "upbeat picture" of the economy is divorced from reality, they think of reality – in this case the reality of economic conditions – as ready to reveal itself so long as we adhere to the appropriate evidentiary procedures (like "cross-check everything"). But the reality of the economic situation will emerge when one of the competing accounts (Rove's or Jackson's and Jamieson's) proves so persuasive that reality is identified with its descriptions. Language (or discourse), rather than either reflecting or distorting reality, produces it, at least in the arena of public debate. The arts Aristotle reluctantly surveys are not obstacles to clear thinking, but the shapers of what will, at least for a time, be seen as clear. Clarity is not a condition of unbiased vision; it is a rhetorical achievement.

It follows then that "letting language do your thinking for you" – one of the habits of mind Jackson and Jamieson warn against – is not an avoidable option; it is simply a description of the way thought inevitably occurs. Forms of language – pieces of vocabulary, proverbial aphorisms, slogans, revered examples of wisdom, metaphors, analogies, precedents and a whole lot more – furnish our consciousness; they are what we think with, and we can't think without them (in two senses of "without").

That is why Orwell's insistence that we "let the meaning choose the word and not the other way around" is so silly. ("Politics and the English Language" is a really terrible essay.) He says that "when you think of a concrete object, you think wordlessly," and the trick is to choose the word that reflects (without adding to or overlaying) the object's concreteness. But objects appear to us only within some discursive framework – some way of talking that is then available as a way of thinking – and someone for whom that discursive framework is alien will simply not see the objects. For those of us who work in higher education the world is populated by perspicuous entities like classrooms, faculty offices, deans, schedules, deadlines, semesters, etc. But someone for whom the world of higher education is a complete mystery (and there are many such) will not see these entities; they will not be objects for him because he doesn't have – hasn't internalized – the discursive forms within which they appear and have an immediately perceivable shape.

Orwell's picture of a world full of independent objects ready to receive the right description from a mind that stands to the side of public linguistic forms and just chooses (with what and in relation to what norms he never says) is a common-sense one, but it rests on

assumptions that will not survive the slightest scrutiny. “First think wordlessly” sounds good as an antidote to the tyranny of words; unfortunately, it’s not something that any human being can do. “Active open-mindedness” – standing to one side of our beliefs and assumptions in the service of unbiased observation – is another name for having no mind at all. Open-mindedness, far from being a virtue, is a condition which, if it could be achieved, would result in a mind that was spectacularly empty. An open mind is an empty mind.

Jackson and Jamieson would reply (and do reply) that fancy philosophical accounts of fact, evidence and language are all right in the seminar room, but what we’re interested in is the fostering of habits of mind – a skepticism that falls short of cynicism, a determination to seek out all the evidence, an awareness of verbal sleights of hand – that will make it less likely that you will be taken in by the next snake-oil salesman. This pragmatic modesty is attractive and commendable, but now and then one gets a glimpse of ambitions that are less modest. As when they suggest that if we “practice the habits of mind and the fact-checking skills … suggested here,” in time, prompted by our example, “our leaders will follow” and the quality of our public debates would improve to the point where spin had been greatly reduced if not eliminated.

But spin – the pronouncing on things from an interested angle – is not a regrettable and avoidable form of suspect thinking and judging; it is the very content of thinking and judging. No spin means no thought, no politics, no debating of what is true and what is false. The dream of improving mankind through a program of linguistic reform – a dream that dies hard and probably never will die – looks forward to a world in which everything is always and already “unspun.” There is such a world; it is sometimes called heaven and it is sometimes called death. It is never called human.