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## 8

# Language

“We invaded Iraq.” I’ve read this statement numerous times. It refers to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, but the times I’ve seen it, the author is not a US soldier, commander or policy-maker, but instead a critic of the invasion. These US critics are disgusted by the lies and damaging actions of the US government—their own government! Hence the word “we.”

Critics know full well the invasion was decided upon by George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and company, sold to a few other governments and carried out through military chains of command. To say “We invaded” is shorthand for something like “Top decision makers in the US government ordered the US military to organise an invasion. Isn’t it terrible that ‘our’ government did this?”<sup>1</sup>

The trouble with “We invaded Iraq” is that it collapses the distinction between the government and the population. “We” suggests that the writer identifies with the government.

A US government official who supported the invasion of Iraq would never say, “We protested against the invasion,” meaning that people in the US protested. Pro-

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1 The word “our” only works for US readers. Foreigners cannot be expected to feel ownership of or association with the US government.

testers are different from, indeed against, the government: protesters are “they.”

The uses of “we” and “they” in relation to the invasion of Iraq provide an example of how assumptions about people and governments enter language and then are strengthened in people’s minds by the constant repetition of that language. This is a very big topic, and I’m only going to touch the surface by mentioning several examples in which language reflects and promotes the identification between individuals and the state.

Consider these different entities:

- Country: a geographical area, encompassing people, institutions and much else
- Government: the system of political leaders or rulers
- People: everyone living in a country

In most news reporting about national and international affairs, the country, government and people are not distinguished. Think of “Berlin today said,” “The US intervened” or “Britain is reluctant.” In media conventions applying to international affairs, the name of the country or the capital city is treated as referring to the government or, more precisely, top officials in the government.

The effect of this sort of language is that it is difficult to talk about—and think about—situations in which people’s views or actions differ from those of government policy-makers. Let’s go back to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Shortly before the invasion, there were massive rallies across the world, the largest anti-war protest in history.

Millions of people demonstrated their opposition to the impending war. Yet the conventional language used to describe what happened is inadequate and misleading. It is inaccurate, in a literal sense, to say, “The US invaded Iraq” because not everyone joined the invasion. It would be inaccurate in the contrary direction to say, “The US demonstrated against an invasion of Iraq” because not everyone in the US demonstrated—but a much larger number demonstrated against the invasion than were involved in the invasion. (I’m setting aside the consideration that most US government officials did not refer to an invasion at all, but instead talked about liberating Iraq.)

Governments are complex organisational entities. To say they act, speak, bargain or feel is to liken them to individuals who, in contrast, are assumed to be unitary. If a part of a person’s body refuses to cooperate, it is seen as dysfunctional, perhaps dangerous, like cancer. Treating a country like an individual invites the assumption that opponents of government policy are similarly dysfunctional, or even dangerous.

When Bush said, “You are either with us or with them [the terrorists],” he played on this analogy of the country with an individual. This “us”—in this instance “us” is “US”—is treated as unitary, when in reality there is no single “us.”

If Bush hadn’t been able to draw on the linguistic assumption of government-country unity, he would have had to say, “Either you support US government terrorism policy or you oppose it.” That’s less punchy and less threatening. It’s far easier to oppose policy than to oppose “us”!

The use of country names for government actions can be called “statist language”: it linguistically attributes the actions of the state—the government and especially leading figures in the government—to the people, to an entire society. It makes it awkward to talk about internal tensions or dissent.<sup>2</sup>

Statist language is a convention: it is the standard way of writing and speaking, especially about international affairs. Any other way can sound strange or cumbersome. It’s easier to say, “Iraq invaded Kuwait” than “Iraqi military forces invaded Kuwait.”

This convention can mask citizen opposition to government. Saying “China decided” discourages people from realising or remembering that it was only the Chinese government, and probably just a few people at the top, who made a decision, and that the bulk of the population were not involved or consulted and many of them may not have wanted this decision if they had been consulted.

In systems of representative government, government leaders have the endorsement of being elected, but this does not mean their policies reflect the unified desires of the entire population. The freer the society, usually the more that differences of opinion can be articulated.

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2 This chapter draws on my article “Statist language,” *Etc.—A Review of General Semantics*, Vol. 66, No. 4, October 2009, pp. 377–381. For a sophisticated treatment of language and national identity, see Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995), pp. 87–127.

Statist language is one type of what can be called unitary language, in which a group of entities is treated as a whole. Unitary language is appropriate when groups operate under a command system, such as the human body, or a group using consensus decision-making, so everyone agrees. But whenever there is significant conflict or internal disagreement, unitary language can be misleading. The statement “General Motors condemned the strikers,” when the strikers are GM workers, offers a different image than “GM management condemned GM workers.”

Unitary language often reflects a hierarchical worldview in which rulers or bosses speak on behalf of their subordinates, whether or not there has been any consultation. In the United Nations, when government representatives speak on behalf of their countries this might be reported as “China said” or “Germany said.” In 1994, the government of Rwanda held a seat on the UN Security Council. The Rwandan government orchestrated a genocide beginning in April, but tried to hide this from the outside world. When the Rwandan Security Council representative reported falsely that the killings had stopped, conventional statist language might have expressed this as “Rwanda told the Security Council the killings had stopped.” But it certainly wasn’t the Rwandan people saying this: they were perpetrators, victims or bystanders of the ongoing genocide.

Another feature of statist language is the assignment of people to countries and vice versa. The people living in France are the French, the people living in Guatemala are Guatemalans, and so forth. Conversely, without the

French there is no France. As noted by Michael Billig, “A form of semantic cleansing operates in these terms: there is no gap between the people and its country.”<sup>3</sup> There are a few anomalies in the linguistic binding of peoples and countries. For example, there are no United Kingdonians, and for much of the world “Americans” refers to US people, not inhabitants of South and North America. Generally, the grammatical conventions associating people with countries serve to make the division of the world via national boundaries seem natural rather than the result of political and social action.

### **Sexist language**

Statist language has many parallels with sexist language. A few decades ago, it was conventional in English to use “he” to mean “he or she,” to use “chairman” to refer to either a man or a woman in the role of chair, and to use “man” to mean “humans.” Male pronouns were standard when referring to both sexes.

Feminists challenged what they called sexist language. They said male words made women invisible by making readers visualise men rather than both sexes. Male language made it harder to imagine a woman in a role, especially a traditionally masculine role.

Defenders of the convention argued against change, saying that everyone knew that “he” included both sexes and that “he or she” is clumsy and “they” is ungrammatical. They made fun of critics by pointing to the alleged absurdities involved in removing mention of men from

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3 Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, p. 78.

language: “woman” would have to be replaced by “womon” and perhaps “person” by “perdaughter.”

The conservative defenders of sexist language lost, so much so that many writers, in quoting from text written in the 1960s or earlier, painstakingly notate male pronouns with “[sic]” or replace them with “[he or she]” to highlight their awareness of, and perhaps distaste for, the sexist language in the original.

### **Examples**

Statist language is so common that it easy to produce a host of examples. To provide illustrations, I picked an issue of the *New York Times*, the newspaper most commonly cited as setting a standard for others. I chose an arbitrary issue, 8 January 2009, the first day I was able to purchase a copy during a visit to the United States.

On the front page is a story titled “China losing taste for debt from the U.S.”<sup>4</sup> Its lead paragraphs include passages such as “Beijing is starting to keep more of its money at home,” “declining Chinese appetite for United States debt,” “China has spent” and “Beijing is seeking to pay.” Of course it is not literally “China” that is “losing taste for debt,” because the article makes no mention of debt preferences among Chinese people, but actually top Chinese economic policy-makers. Only later in the article are there more precise references to “the Chinese government,” “Chinese businesses” and “China’s leadership.”

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4 Keith Bradsher, “China losing taste for debt from the U.S.,” *New York Times*, 8 January 2009, pp. A1, A10.



On page A6 is the story “Ex-prostitutes say South Korea and U.S. enabled sex trade near bases.”<sup>5</sup> The reference to “South Korea” and “U.S.” must refer to military or political authorities, because the average South Korean plays no role in the sex trade and the average U.S. citizen knows nothing at all about U.S. military bases in South Korea, much less the existence of the sex trade—unless, perhaps, they have read this or a similar article.

This story occasionally uses statist language but for the most part uses more precise references. The first sentence is “South Korea has railed for years against the Japanese government’s waffling,” which doesn’t reveal who in South Korea had railed—the government? activists?—but pinpoints the target of complaint, the Japanese government.

In the second paragraph, the article says “Now, a group of former prostitutes in South Korea have accused some of their country’s former leaders of a different kind of abuse: encouraging them to have sex with the American soldiers who protected South Korea from North Korea.” Note the precision of “a group of former prostitutes” and “some of their country’s former leaders” compared to the reference to “protected South Korea from North Korea,” which implicitly groups North Korean citizens with the North Korean government as a threat to South Korea, again a single undifferentiated entity.

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5 Choe Sang-Hun, “Ex-prostitutes say South Korea and U.S. enabled sex trade near bases,” *New York Times*, 8 January 2009, p. A6.

On page A12, one of the several stories on the conflict in Gaza is titled “As Gaza battle goes on, Israel is set to negotiate with Egypt on cease-fire.”<sup>6</sup> The title refers of course to the governments of Israel and Egypt. The first sentence begins “Israel said Wednesday ...” This common formulation suggests that “Israel” is a person speaking with a single voice. It disguises the diversity of political opinion within Israel over policies and actions concerning Gaza. Although many readers understand this diversity and treat “Israel said” as “Israeli government spokepeople said,” the statist shorthand may discourage thinking of the complexity. For those not familiar with complexities of Israeli politics, “Israel said” reinforces a mental image of discrete entities, Israel, Egypt and Gaza.

Paragraph three begins “Israel suspended its military operations in Gaza for three hours ...” Perhaps the Israeli government or military suspended military operations; most Israelis had no say in this decision, and many members of Israeli peace movements would not like to be implicated in any decision to use military force in the first place.

Paragraph five begins “ Hamas fired 22 rockets into Israel ...” How many readers would stop to think that perhaps not every member of Hamas supports firing rockets? Certainly not all of them were involved in the firing itself.

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6 Steven Erlanger, “As Gaza battle goes on, Israel is set to negotiate with Egypt on cease-fire,” *New York Times*, 8 January 2009, p. A12.

Elsewhere in the article there is similar statist language, but more precise language is also used, with references to, for example, “the Israeli Army,” “the Israeli government,” and “the government spokesman.” It is certainly possible to write without statist constructions.

These are just a few examples taken from one issue of the *New York Times*. The same observations could be made using news reports from innumerable sources.

### **Alternatives**

Instead of “We invaded Iraq” or “The US invaded Iraq,” what would be a more accurate formulation? One possibility is “the US military invaded Iraq” or “The US government launched an invasion of Iraq.” Referring to the military or the government helps to direct attention to those acting, thereby allowing that others, including members of the US population, may not be involved or supportive.

The use of a country’s name to refer to the government is quite convenient, and alternatives are cumbersome. The obvious alternative to “US” would be “US government” or perhaps “USG” for short. Those who want to be really precise in their language would say that “US government” is still unacceptable, because not everyone in the government supports actions taken in the name of the government—certainly not the invasion of Iraq.

When talking or writing about government actions, it is straightforward to avoid constructions that conflate the government and the people in a country: just avoid any statements that refer to the country acting as a whole. This means not saying something like “China declared” but

instead “a representative of the Chinese government declared” and not saying “India is having talks with Pakistan” but instead perhaps “Indian and Pakistani government officials are having talks.” Because the alternatives are cumbersome, it is all too easy to revert to conventional expressions.

Another option is to use the abbreviated form but in an unconventional way. You might say “India opposed the trade agreement” when actually Indian policy-makers supported it—however, only those who are knowledgeable about the issue will understand that you are referring to civil society groups or popular opinion, not the government.

Statist language brings a pervasive bias into reporting, especially on international affairs, typically favouring governments over opponents and popular movements and sometimes over popular opinion. Using different expressions is not easy: habits run deep. Challenging those habits is a small step towards better understanding and better strategic thinking. Non-statist language will not solve the world’s problems but it can help make them more apparent.