

STATIST LANGUAGE

BRIAN MARTIN

News reports commonly include statements such as “the U.S. today announced” or “China reacted.” Such statements can be misleading, sometimes seriously so.

It is a long-standing convention that the name of a country refers to its government or some action by sections of the government. For example, “Iraq invaded Kuwait” means that Iraqi military forces—under the control of the government of Iraq, in particular Saddam Hussein—invaded the territory known as Kuwait.

The trouble with this formulation is that “Iraq” suggests that the entire country is a unified whole—in particular, that the government and the people are united. So “Iraq invaded Kuwait” suggests that the people of Iraq supported the invasion. Anyone familiar with Iraq’s political situation knows that many people in Iraq opposed the government—indeed, had been persecuted by it. The linguistic shorthand of “Iraq invaded Kuwait” hides political differences within Iraq, especially by omitting the existence of opposition to the government.

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.

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 is easier to say “Iraq invaded Kuwait” than “Iraqi military forces invaded Kuwait.”

This convention is potentially damaging because it disguises the possibility of citizen opposition to government. Saying “China decided” discourages

Brian Martin is professor of social sciences at the University of Wollongong, Australia. He is the author of a dozen books and hundreds of articles on whistle-blowing, nonviolence, scientific controversies, democracy, information issues, and other topics. Web: <http://www.bmartin.cc/>

people from realizing 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 was not involved or consulted—and many of them may not have wanted this decision if they had been consulted.

Statist language reflects an assumption or metaphor that states are individuals, acting with conscious intent, like a human body controlled by the brain. States used to be feminine in gender: “Germany said she was going to vote no.” This linguistic construction now sounds silly and is fading away through lack of use. But the standard statist convention continues much the same.

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 visualize 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 language: “man” would have to be replaced by “person” or even “perdaughter.”

The conservative defenders of sexist language lost, so much so that many writers 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 is easy to produce a host of examples. To select illustrations, I chose an issue of the *New York Times*, the newspaper most commonly cited as setting a standard for others. I picked an arbitrary issue, January 8, 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.” 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.”

On page A6 is the story “Ex-Prostitutes Say South Korea and U.S. Enabled Sex Trade Near Bases.” 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 does not 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.

On page A12, one of several stories on the conflict in Gaza is titled “As Gaza Battle Goes On, Israel Is Set to Negotiate with Egypt on Cease-Fire.” 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 spokesperson said,” the statist shorthand may discourage thinking of the complexity. For those not familiar with the 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

Q: “discrete” as meant?



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.

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

Non-statist language already exists. There are two primary obstacles to using it. One is tradition, the most powerful force against change. The other is the attraction of convenience: statist language is brief. It is far easier to say “Israel” than “the Israeli government.” Brevity is hardly a definitive justification for a misleading practice, though, as shown by the example of sexist language: “he” is easier than “he or she.”

One alternative is creating new non-statist constructions. For example, the letter G could be added to the end of country names to indicate governments. The Israeli government would be IsraelG and the US government would be USG. The G would be a reminder that the government is not identical to the country or the population.

New constructions have a difficult time gaining traction. The non-sexist option of “them” instead of “he or she” is gradually gaining users in the face of grammatical purists, but new spellings such as “wimmyn” have never had more than a minority following.

The easiest way to promote alternatives is to promote non-statist constructions that are full-length and grammatical, such as “the Chinese government.” If enough people complain about statist language and enough writers use non-statist expressions, headline writers will eventually come up with alternatives.

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 is mis-

leading. “General Motors condemned the strikers” is misleading, especially when the strikers are 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. During the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, conventional statist language could have said “Rwanda told the Security Council the killings had stopped,” because the government of Rwanda—then leading the genocide—at the time held a seat on the UN Security Council.

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 more democratic the society, usually the more often differences of opinion are articulated.

Journalists are expected to present a balanced view in their reporting. The choice of words is crucial; for example, whether to call a group terrorists or freedom fighters or insurgents or some other label. Statist language brings a pervasive bias into reporting, especially on international affairs, typically favoring governments over opponents, popular movements, and sometimes popular opinion. Non-statist language will not solve the world’s problems, but it will help make them more apparent.

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