

Truth, Lies, and the Power of the Word

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I would like to speak about a wonderful gift that we all share, without which we could not fulfill our purpose on earth. It is the gift of language. To place this topic in proper perspective, I will start at the very beginning—a very good place to start. When God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, He made it clear that they and their descendants were to have “dominion” over all the earth (Moses 2:26)—or, in other words, they were to have presiding and governing power in the earth. It was surely not their physical strength that would give them dominion—because many animals were larger and stronger than they were. It would be by other means, among which language was paramount, because with it Adam and Eve could commune with God and establish relationships in their new world. It is significant that after Adam was placed in the garden, his first task was to name things (Moses 3:19), for it is by naming and defining relationships that we establish order and dominion. Ever since that first linguistic exercise, the use of language has made it possible for us to record and transmit information from generation to generation, thereby allowing us to maintain dominion (Moses 6:5–6). To this day the power of words remains the primary means by which men and women try to exer-

cise dominion or influence in the world. Sometimes that dominion or influence is economic, sometimes political, often emotional, and, fortunately, in its finest manifestation, spiritual. I would like to share a few examples of how we use and how we are influenced by language in each of these spheres: the economic, the political, the emotional, and the spiritual.

Economic Power of Words

Let’s first consider how words affect us economically. Millions of dollars are spent each year in carefully crafting the messages we see and hear in advertising, from the self-indulgent “I’m worth it” to the clever “Yo quiero Taco Bell.” I have always been amused by commercials that say, “Nothing tastes better (or washes better) than brand X.” If that’s the case, I should buy nothing. Companies recognize the power of words when they name products. If the product has an appealing or special name, it can be sold for a higher price—hence designer labels.

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Of course, if a name becomes associated with negative feelings, it can keep people from buying a product. When General Motors introduced its Chevy Nova to Latin America, it was embarrassed to learn that in Spanish “no va” meant “it doesn’t go.” A slightly older generation among us will remember how the Edsel automobile was a sales failure, and someone quipped that it “looks like an Oldsmobile sucking a lemon.”¹ The name Edsel could never sell automobiles successfully.

In the years that followed, automobile manufacturers became very cautious in naming cars. For a time they used animal names: cougar, lynx, mustang, cobra, etc. Then they cautiously settled for two- or three-syllable names that ended in the vowel *a* and sounded a little Japanese. Consider Acura, Sentra, Mazda, Aurora, Festiva, Integra, Maxima, Corsica, and Corolla. These similarities are not coincidental. Likewise, some time ago pharmaceutical companies found that if the names of their products ended in “-in” they would sell well. Consider aspirin, penicillin, Coracidin, Pamprin, and Cholestin, to mention a few.²

With modern information technologies, we are being bombarded more than any previous generation with linguistic messages designed to influence us economically. Consider how many credit card and loan offers you receive in a month or how many ads you see as you search the Internet. As a new millennium approaches, this bombardment will only increase. Our business world is very much aware of the economic power of words. Perhaps we all should be also, so we can recognize how we are being influenced by them.

Political Power of Words

And what would politics be without the power of words—words that inform, persuade; words that manipulate; words that tell half-truths; words that inspire; and words that speak truth. With the passage of time through earlier millennia, some sacred uses of language

undoubtedly became corrupted and used not only for sacred purposes but also for political purposes. For example, in some preliterate cultures a shaman or other leader maintains political power by relying on incantations and the “power” of secret or special words to accomplish certain tasks. I have found it intriguing to study the shaman heroes in early Finnish oral traditions, in which social position and power were determined by one’s ability to recite the right words.

In modern society the shaman has been replaced by such persons as advertisers, spin doctors, televangelists, and sometimes demagogues. Hitler’s use of language was successful in mobilizing a nation and gaining the allegiance of many to do things they would never do of their own initiative. We have seen in recent decades the use of language by totalitarian regimes to misinform and to withhold information in an attempt to control people. Our own nation is guilty of what has been called “doublespeak”³ in using euphemistic terms and dense jargon to mask unpleasant realities and to control public opinion. One wonders what Nephi, who delighted in plainness, would think of this scene (see 2 Nephi 25:4).

Sometimes zeal for a political cause motivates people to misrepresent the truth with shocking words to achieve their ends. Such misrepresentations seem obvious, often ludicrous, when directed at this country by a hostile foreign government that wants to depict this country as totally evil, but such misrepresentations are not so obvious when they occur within our own borders. Our fast-paced world has given rise to a sound-bite culture in which half-truths can be easily disseminated without adequate discussion or rebuttal to gain a good understanding of a person or an issue. Misuse of the power of words to achieve political ends can cause many problems before it is exposed. In our own recorded history it has contributed to wars, martyrdoms, and character assassinations. Fortunately, we also have men and

women of integrity who, like Nephi of old, speak truth with plainness and deserve our admiration. They carry our trust and our hopes for a better tomorrow. We are grateful they use the power of words righteously.

Our First Amendment right to freedom of speech must carry with it a responsibility for speakers to be ethical and for listeners to be discerning. Too often zeal for a particular cause overrides one of these responsibilities. Recently, when our Church leaders were encouraging members in California to uphold the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman, some accused the Church of “export[ing] the politics of division and hatred.”⁴ Most who read that phrase recognized it as political posturing, but the use of this phrase points out the need for us to agree at least on the meanings of words. In fact, one of the most necessary parts of our language is the notion of the “definition.” We must agree on definitions of words if discourse is to be civil and productive. When special interests are at stake, disagreements arise and definitions become critical lines of defense. In legal cases, personal fortunes, careers, and life-and-death decisions can turn on the definition of a single word. Even as we speak, billions of dollars are at stake in a linguistic dance that a tobacco company is doing to defend its actions, using one definition of the word *addictive* before Congress and in the courts and another definition of the word when it speaks to you and me.⁵

Definitions have been used throughout history to justify horrible things. In wartime, enemies are labeled with terms that make them seem less than human so that killing them is more tolerable. Slavery in the United States and the atrocities of the Holocaust were perpetuated by defining African Blacks and Jews as something less than human. Some modern uses of racist language are not far from the same abuses.

Some, in an attempt to discredit or marginalize the Church, have developed a definition of *Christian* that conveniently and ironically excludes The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-

day Saints.⁶ As some strain to define words to justify their actions, the results can be self-contradictory, as we have seen with our society’s attempt to define a fetus as something with potential but not really a person—that is, if it is aborted.⁷ But if someone kills the fetus in an act of violence against a pregnant woman, the fetus may be defined as a person and the perpetrator may be charged with a crime.⁸ Sometimes a society weaves a tangled web to justify its actions. History has shown that as definitions change, so do perceptions, and changes in behavior do not lag far behind. We must be on guard to keep our own thinking straight.

Linguists know that definitions have a way of changing through time and in response to social pressures, but eternal verities do not change through time, nor do they change in response to social pressures. This fact alone, in any age, cries out for living prophets whose words can keep the doctrine pure and the path straight. In his day Paul was very much aware of this power of words when he cautioned, “There are . . . many kinds of voices in the world, and none of them is without signification” (1 Corinthians 14:10). With these many voices in our world, we truly need an “iron rod” that “will safely guide us through” (“The Iron Rod,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 274).

Emotional Power of Words

We may begin to think that language use or abuse is mainly an economic or political issue, but it is also a very personal and emotional one. The power of language does not stop at what or whom we can control with it. In fact, one of the most significant functions of language is quite beyond our conscious control. We might even say it controls us. It is the function of establishing our identities. Few things are closer to our personal, group, or national identities than is our language. Few things affect us more emotionally than hearing comments about our language. Consider how we feel when we have a term paper returned with negative comments

about our use of language. Many immigrants to this country feel discriminated against because they speak with an accent. Persons from different dialect areas find others' speech amusing, whereas their own is perfectly normal. Children moving to a new neighborhood will rapidly learn the vocabulary and pronunciation of the new area in order to be part of the group. Even on a national level our language defines our identities. Consider the French-speaking Canadians who have agitated for the creation of their own country or the Estonian World War II refugees who continued to teach Estonian to their children for more than 50 years in the hope of returning to their homeland when it would be free once again.

Every country and every region has its own linguistic pride and idiosyncracies that define it for good or ill. Residents of Utah Valley joke good-naturedly about the pronunciation of Spanish "Fark" for Spanish "Fork." In my own dialect the words that most of you pronounce [wɔɹ] and [wɔɹd] are pronounced [war] and [ward], and there is no difference between the pronunciation of "pitcher" and "picture." They are both "pitcher." Slight differences in pronunciation have sometimes had serious consequences. We read in Judges 12 that the Ephraimites and Gileadites were at war, and when many Ephraimites tried to cross over Gileadite territory, pretending to be Gileadites, the Gileadite men would stop them and ask whether they were Ephraimites. If they answered no, the Gileadites would ask them to say the word *shibboleth*, a Hebrew word meaning "stream." Ephraimites would pronounce the word with an ess sound, "sibboleth," because they had difficulty pronouncing the "sh" sound. When they pronounced it this way, their true identities were revealed and they were killed. We read that 42,000 Ephraimites were killed at that time (see Judges 12:6). To this day we refer to any characteristic of one's speech that distinguishes him or her as a member of a particular group as a "shibboleth." The

Ephraimites learned then what Peter was to learn later, that our speech betrays us (see Matthew 26:73). (As far as we know, the Spanish "Fark" pronunciation has not resulted in a single death, although it may produce some mayhem against me after today!)

Even the names by which we are known influence our hopes, our aspirations, and our behaviors. What young man would not think twice about how he behaves if he had been given the name Gordon B.? Surely Abram, Sarai, and Jacob reflected often on the significance of their new names, after the Lord had changed them to Abraham, Sarah, and Israel (see Genesis 17:5, 15; 32:28). Personal names carry power. We have all been lifted by hearing our names mentioned in a positive context.

On the other hand, many of us have been hurt by being called names, and we have hurt others by using unkind or unwise words. As children we heard, "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me." We all know that is false, especially those among us who have been called names when we were young, who were told we were stupid or ugly or always doing dumb things. Often the damage done by words is worse than damage done by physical violence. In reality we should handle our words as carefully as we would handle a gun, because both can have devastating effects and bring long-lasting pain to others and to ourselves.

Brigham Young taught an interesting principle, that by controlling our words we gain control of our thoughts. The Epistle of James teaches us that small things like the bit in a horse's mouth or the rudder on a ship can control the larger body (James 3:1–4). So also, by the small matter of controlling our tongues, we gain control over our bodies.

We need to fortify ourselves against others' use of language that influences us emotionally, whether it be vulgar or hurtful language. We are children of a loving Father in Heaven, and regardless of what may be said of us, we should

know who we are and what our potential is and what the Atonement can do for us. Not everyone has the blessing of this knowledge. Consider the experience related by the late Isaac Asimov, the author and editor of 470 books and considered by many as one of America's greatest intellects. Asimov was not shy about his abilities. In his memoirs he wrote, "I have always thought of myself as a remarkable fellow, even from childhood, and I have never wavered in that opinion."⁹ If anyone had what modern society calls high self-esteem, Asimov seems to have had it. Yet in his memoirs he recounts an incident that he could never forget.

As a 15-year-old high school student, Asimov had enrolled in a writing class. The teacher's first assignment was to have the students write an essay. When the teacher asked for volunteers to read their efforts before the class, Asimov raised his hand. In his memoirs he recalled:

I had read only about a quarter of it when [the teacher] stopped me and used an opprobrious barnyard term to describe my writing. (I had never heard a teacher use a "dirty word" before and I was shocked.) The class wasn't, however. They laughed at me very uproariously and I took my seat in bitter shame.¹⁰

Although humiliated, Asimov conceded in his memoirs that his teacher's assessment was correct. He himself explained that he had tried to affect a literary style, but what emerged was "rotten."¹¹ He took his teacher's criticism to heart and wrote a lighthearted piece that the same teacher had printed in the school's literary journal. It was his first significant publication. But when he thanked the teacher for including it in the journal, his teacher hurt him further by saying that he had only published it because he needed a light piece to complete the issue and all the other pieces were serious.¹²

At the age of 70, two years before his death, and 55 years after the incident, Asimov wrote of that teacher:

I hate very few people, but I hate him. . . .

. . . I wish I had a time machine and could go back to 1934 with some of my books and some of the articles that have been written about me and say to him, "How do you like that, you rotten louse? You didn't know whom you had in your class. If you had treated me right, I could have recorded you as my discoverer, instead of branding you a rotten louse."¹³

Now we could discuss Asimov's ego and with gospel insight how he could have (should have) risen from bitterness to forgiveness. Still, if one so confident in his own abilities can be hurt for so long, we must recognize the long-lasting power of our own unkind words. We can imagine how very different this scenario would have been if his teacher had shown genuine caring and had discussed Asimov's writing in a private, friendly setting. Perhaps it would have been different, too, if he had attended Primary and had learned a sweet song: "I am a child of God." Rabbi Milton Steinberg is quoted as saying, "When I was young, I admired clever people. Now that I am older, I admire kind people."¹⁴ And his colleague Joseph Telushkin added, "It's a greater accomplishment to be kind than to be brilliant."¹⁵ From Proverbs we read: "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver" (Proverbs 25:11).

Spiritual Power of Words

I have tried to illustrate ever so briefly some of the economic, political, and emotional power of words. I am sure you can add more examples. Let us now consider the spiritual power of words. The Church, of course, is very concerned with the power of language—not to promote nationalism, because the gospel must always be international or nonnational, nor to impose political control through linguistic manipulation, because the Spirit must always be free. But the power of language can bring the Church out of obscurity, unite a Zion people, spread the gospel message, inspire people to good works, maintain the efficacy of sacred

ordinances, and preserve respect for deity and for each other. From time to time the names of Church programs have been changed to more accurately communicate intent. Thus ward teaching has become home teaching and the Mutual Improvement Association has become the Young Men and Young Women organizations or simply Mutual.

The Church has a significant commitment to the learning of foreign languages and the translating of Church materials into those languages with as much dispatch and accuracy as means will allow. Every young priesthood holder learns that the prayers offered at the sacrament table are to be spoken exactly as directed in the scriptures (see D&C 20:76–79, Moroni 4, 5). It goes without saying that the Church frowns on the use of vulgar language. The taking of the name of God in vain is a serious offense, and English-speaking members are encouraged to use the “thee, thou, and thy” pronouns when giving prayers.

As many others were abandoning Him, the Savior asked Peter whether he, too, would leave him. “Where would I go?” Peter answered: “Thou hast the words of eternal life” (John 6:67–68). The words of eternal life are words that teach us who we are, what our condition is, who our Redeemer is, why we can trust in Him, and how we can return to enjoy eternal life with our Father in Heaven. While we are in mortality, such words also invoke the power of the priesthood, pronounce blessings on the sick, and heal hearts and minds through kind expressions and wise counseling. Words of confession lift the burdens of sin from us; words place us under covenants so we can lift and be lifted; they bind us to eternal blessings; they give us confidence in the future, for we know that God does not lie.

It is interesting that after Peter had told the Savior who others thought He was, the Savior asked, “Whom say ye that I am?” (Matthew 16:15). Surely the Savior was not asking for information that He didn’t already have, but rather was asking to have Peter testify verbally,

as he did: “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). There is something very powerful about giving testimony of the Savior in our own words, for it binds us to Him and makes us receptive to additional light. Alma knew well the power of testimony when he gave up the judgment seat to go among the people of Nephi,

that he might preach the word of God unto them, to stir them up in remembrance of their duty, and that he might pull down, by the word of God, all the pride and craftiness and all the contentions which were among his people, seeing no way that he might reclaim them save it were in bearing down in pure testimony against them. [Alma 4:19]

President Packer has taught that “a testimony is to be *found* in the *bearing* of it!”¹⁶ This gaining of testimony happens in a way that the world doesn’t understand, because it involves the power of words in another dimension. Paul spoke of this dimension when he taught that “the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14). The “words of eternal life” that Peter referred to are spiritually discerned. Such words strike a chord in our souls, and we receive a testimony of their truth. The Prophet Joseph Smith experienced this when he read in the Epistle of James: “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him” (James 1:5). Joseph recalled: “Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart” (JS—H 1:12).

Let me share just one passage of scripture that speaks very loudly to my heart of its truth. Consider the words in section 13 of the Doctrine and Covenants that report the visit of John the Baptist to restore the Aaronic Priesthood on the

heads of Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery. If one were to invent such a story and hope to make others believe it were true, I suspect that person could embellish it with descriptions of remarkable signs from the heavens and impressive displays of power and authority. Instead, what we read is a humble statement by John the Baptist of what he was about. He spoke:

Upon you my fellow servants, in the name of Messiah I confer the Priesthood of Aaron, which holds the keys of the ministering of angels, and of the gospel of repentance, and of baptism by immersion for the remission of sins. [D&C 13:1]

Why don't we see John saying something more attention-getting with a loud voice and with a clap of thunder? Could it be that he knew Joseph and Oliver from before? Could it be that he had great respect for the prophet of this dispensation as one who was truly a great fellow servant in this work? Have you noticed that great souls behave mildly when they perform spiritual deeds? The fact is that truth does not need embellishment. Finally, could it be that, unlike others of Joseph Smith's time who would have said "in the name of Jesus Christ," John used the word *Messiah*, the name by which he knew the Savior during his time on earth? I submit to you that this straightforward language is powerful and bespeaks truth.

Such is the power of the language in Joseph Smith's own story and of the language in the Book of Mormon and the other scriptures that testify of Christ and His mission. When I read the words aloud, I feel their power even more. It is language that is not always pleasing to the carnal mind and causes many to kick against the pricks, but when accepted and lived, it rings true with the Spirit and enlarges the soul.

It is clear that the way we use language is an important concern in all our relationships. It is especially so in our spiritual lives. It has been so throughout time, from the words "Let there be light" to the words "It is finished"

(Genesis 1:3, John 19:30). In the case of the Ephraimites, the mispronunciation of *shibboleth* meant certain death, but in the case of Christ, the declarations "Lazarus, come forth" or "go, and sin no more" meant life and restoration (John 11:43, John 8:11).

The Savior underscored the importance of using the gift of language in ethical ways when He taught, "Let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil (Matthew 5:37). Paul, in a letter to the Romans, also noted the importance of language in bringing the gospel to the world when he wrote, "How shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?" (Romans 10:14). In other words, missionaries and their message are critical to accomplishing the task. The Lord has decreed that everyone will "hear the fulness of the gospel in his own tongue" (D&C 90:11). When we understand how our deeply felt emotions are evoked more accurately and meaningfully by words in our native languages than they are by the words of languages we have learned as foreign languages, we begin to understand why it is important for us to hear the gospel in our own tongue so we can feel the full significance of the words and be receptive to the "workings of the Spirit." Such realization, combined with an awareness of the other influences of language we have discussed, should lead us to a reverence for the considerate, careful, truthful, and ethical use of language, for the very words we speak shape our beliefs, define our dominions, and create the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual worlds in which we live.

I leave you to ponder the significance of the Savior Himself being called the Word. In the King James Version of the Bible, the Gospel of John begins:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . .

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us . . . , full of grace and truth. [John 1:1, 14]

The Joseph Smith translation equates “the Word” with both the gospel and the Son of God.

This *Word* has endowed us with power to receive all that the Father has, but none of it can be received without words. I testify that Jesus Christ is our Savior and Redeemer and that the “words of eternal life” revealed through modern prophets are true, that the Church of Jesus Christ is restored with all authority, keys, and added scripture, and that “as the stone which is cut out of the mountain without hands,” it is rolling forth to fill the whole earth (D&C 65:2; see also Daniel 2:35). It is a wonderful blessing to be fellow servants in such a great work.

I end where I began, calling your attention to the connection between language and dominion. As we have seen, there are many kinds of dominion in our world, but only one kind will last forever. May we be discerning of the language used in the world today, and may our own language be ever in harmony with His will. May “virtue garnish [our] thoughts” so that, as He has promised, our “dominion shall be an everlasting dominion, and without compulsory means it shall flow unto [us] forever and ever” (D&C 121:45–46). In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Fred Barrett, *Names That Sell: How to Create Great Names for Your Company, Product, or Service* (Portland: Alder Press, 1995), 15.

2. Discussions of these naming patterns may be found in Barrett, *Names That Sell*, 11–15, and in Naseem Javed, *Naming for Power: Creating Successful Names for the Business World* (New York: Linkbridge Publishing, 1993).

3. This term has been used widely at least since the 1960s to characterize this type of speech. A recent work on the subject is by William Lutz, *The New Doublespeak: Why No One Knows What Anyone’s Saying Anymore* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).

4. “Group Opposes LDS Activism on Gay Marriages,” *Provo Daily Herald*, 11 July 1999, A2.

5. In what appeared to be a contradiction to earlier testimony before Congress, the Philip Morris Company published the following statement on its Web page for 12 October 1999: “Cigarette smoking is addictive, *as that term is most commonly used today* (italics mine). See http://www.philipmorris.com/tobacco_bus/tobacco_issues/health_issues.html.

On ABC’s *Nightline*, 13 October 1999, the president of the Philip Morris Company asserted that the tobacco leaders who had testified before Congress that cigarette smoking was not addictive were responding to a different (pharmaceutical) definition of *addiction*.

6. This tactic, hardly employed in earlier years, is becoming very prevalent among other Christian denominations that do not accept the doctrine of preexistence or the separation of the Godhead into three distinct personages.

7. Excellent discussions and other resources on this topic are found in Camille S. Williams, “Abortion and Equality Under the Law,” chapter 6 in Gary C. Bryner and A. Don Sorensen, eds., *The Bill of Rights: A Bicentennial Assessment* (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1993). See also Camille S. Williams, “Feminism and Imaging the Unborn,” chapter 5 in Brad Stetson, ed., *The Silent Subject: Reflections on the Unborn in American Culture* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1996).

8. This issue has been raised in many quarters in recent years. At this writing, a bill has just passed the House (254 to 172), over the objections of abortion rights lawmakers, “that would make it a crime to harm a fetus during a violent act against a pregnant woman.” Supporters “argued that the fetus should have the same legal protections as the mother from criminal assault” (“House Votes to Make Hurting Fetus a Crime,” *Deseret News*, 1 October 1999, A2).

9. Isaac Asimov, *I. Asimov: A Memoir* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 49.

10. *Ibid.*, 51.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Cf. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin relating this story in *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal: How to Choose Words Wisely and Well* (New York: William and Morrow, 1995), 94–95.

13. *Asimov*, 51–52.

14. Telushkin, *Words That Hurt*, 126.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Boyd K. Packer, “The Candle of the Lord,” *Ensign*, January 1983, 54; emphasis in original.