

## The Word Lab

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George W. Bush devoted a whole section of his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention to making fun of Al Gore for his habit of putting down various Bush proposals through the use of the phrase "risky scheme." ("If my opponent had been there at the moon launch, it would have been a 'risky rocket scheme,' " Bush said.) That shut Gore up—he hasn't called anything a risky scheme lately. But then Hillary Rodham Clinton, in her first debate with Rick Lazio, accused him of proposing "risky tax schemes." Coincidence? Bits of language ricochet around in the political world these days. They reappear across wide expanses of time and space, leaping from campaign to campaign.

You could be forgiven for supposing that somewhere in the country (a refitted underground missile silo on the Great Plains?) each party maintains a secret Word Lab. There purposeful young people in gray uniforms sit in front of computer screens, trying out different linguistic combinations. When a magic grouping of words is achieved, bells ring, lights flash, the purposeful young people give each other high fives, and then a directive goes out to all the party's thousands of candidates: it's not "affirmative action" anymore; it's "preferences."

Admittedly, there is no Word Lab per se. There are, however, virtual Word Labs, which generate phrases and rhetorical strategies that are deemed to be politically effective, and then put them into the hands of candidates. Probably the most elaborate one has been run by a Republican pollster named Frank Luntz, who has produced two rhetorical guides for Republicans running for office this year. One is a pocket-size pamphlet called "Right Words," the other a five-pound, four-hundred-and-six-page loose-leaf binder called "A Conversation with America 2000," which includes speech texts on many subjects.

Luntz advises his candidates to say "Department of Defense" instead of "Pentagon," "opportunity scholarships" instead of "vouchers," "tax relief" instead of "tax cuts," and "climate change" instead of "global warming." The terms "Washington" and "I.R.S.," Luntz says, always play as super-negative and should be attached to any policy you want to turn people against. "Prosperity" is super-positive. In general, words starting with an "r" or ending with an "-ity" are good—hence "reform" and "accountability" work and "responsibility" really works. Negative is over. (In 1996, Luntz got Newt Gingrich to give him a written pledge that he would never attack President Clinton by name, but Gingrich fell off the wagon after only eleven days.) Calling your opponent a liberal is over, too, although you may call him a politician, or, better yet, a Washington politician. You can attract female voters by using the words "listening" and "children" a lot. ("Why do you think Hillary Clinton went on a 'Listening Tour' of New York?" Luntz asks.) Specifics are better than generalities—that's why Al Gore, who Luntz says definitely reads his stuff, reframed George W. Bush's tax cut in his acceptance speech as a Diet Coke a day, rather than \$1.3 trillion. If you're going to attack, do it through rhetorical questions—that's why Rick Lazio often says, on the campaign trail, "Can you name one single thing that Hillary Clinton has ever done for New York?"

I first encountered Luntz in person the day before the Republican Convention opened, in Philadelphia. Luntz recently decided to get out of politics to concentrate on corporate and media clients, and made a deal with MSNBC to run opinion-research sessions during both conventions, in which he would demonstrate how swing voters were reacting to the show. This was the first session. Thirty-six real people filed into a hotel function room near the Convention hall and seated themselves in three rows of folding chairs, the Leaning Republicans on one side, the Leaning Democrats on the other, the True Undecideds in the middle. Jammed into what little space remained in the room were members of the national political press corps, there to cover the MSNBC coverage of the real people. Luntz bustled in, playing the part of a pollster / geek / minor celebrity. He is a boyish, manic, perpetually mussed man, with a mop of dirty-blond hair and pouty lips. There is usually a gleam in his eye and a mischievous suppressed smile on his lips, as if he'd just got a cosmic joke that he was now going to let everybody else in on—very slowly. He says he sleeps three hours a night, non-consecutively. This helps him get a lot of work done, but it leaves him with a

jazzed, pouchy appearance.

Luntz, who was very good at putting his subjects at ease, asked people to throw out adjectives about the Presidential candidates. Bush drew "aggressive," "vapid," "strong," "opinionated," and "trigger-happy." Gore drew "weak," "charismatic," "indecisive," and "sneaky."

A little later, Luntz instructed people to pick up dials that were next to their chairs. He played a series of Gore and Bush television advertisements on a monitor while they moved their dials in moment-by-moment reaction, clockwise when they were liking what they were seeing, counterclockwise when they weren't. A computer received the electrical impulses from the dials, averaged them, and converted the result into a graph that jerked up and down like a stock table. During breaks between the ads, Luntz alternately made comments about the real people to the media and about the media to the real people, in a sort of infinite regress of opinion formation.

The morning after the Convention ended, I caught up with Luntz and asked him how he gets from the kind of event I had seen to the language he recommends to candidates. "The way I do it, usually, is to hear the words of somebody else," he said. "I can't give you a single example of a word I actually created. The way my words are created is by taking the words of others—average Americans, not politicians. I've moderated an average of a hundred-plus focus groups a year over five years. "Thirty instant-response sessions a year— the ones with the dials—over three years. I show them language that I've created. Then I leave a line for them to create language for me."

He explained that he had got into the Word Lab business almost accidentally, back in 1992. Like a lot of political consultants, Luntz was a wunderkind (and he still collects baseball cards). He grew up in West Hartford, Connecticut, the son of a dentist and "a rather strict Jewish mom who'd allow me anything I wanted if it was for my intellect, and nothing I wanted if it was for fun." He was reading news magazines, he says, at the age of six. At seventeen, he was the Connecticut state chairman of the Teen Age Republicans. Before he got to college, he had made himself a protégé of Arthur Finkelstein, the Republican consultant who pioneered the campaign technique of constantly calling your opponent a liberal. As an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania, Luntz was doing campaign work for Republican candidates out of his dorm room. After graduate study in politics at Oxford, he went to work for Richard Wirthlin, who was Ronald Reagan's pollster and, according to Luntz, the man who popularized the use of handheld instant-response dials in politics. His big break came when he was hired by Ross Perot, back in the early days of Perot's first Presidential campaign, when he was unstoppably popular.

One day, Luntz was running a focus group in Detroit to test Perot television ads. There were three: a biography, a Perot speech, and testimonials from other people. "In these sessions," he told me, "I find the consensus and try to destroy it. Build and strip. What I had found was that you couldn't strip people away from Perot." But at the session in Detroit, by mistake, Luntz ran the ads in reverse order—the testimonials, the speech, and then the biography—and found that the people there didn't like Perot at all. His opinions seemed intemperate if they didn't rest on the foundation of his impressive rags-to-riches life story. The lesson, Luntz says, was that "the order in which you give information determines how people think."

That got Luntz into seriously experimenting with language. In 1994, Newt Gingrich, who had for years been producing lists of positively and negatively valenced words for Republican use, hired Luntz as pollster for the Contract with America, which now stands as an early field test of a standard national rhetoric in local campaigns. Luntz also worked in Rudolph Giuliani's mayoral campaigns, and Giuliani's departure from the Senate race may have had something to do with Luntz's decision to abandon politics, since he unabashedly worships the guy.

Early in his New York politics period, Luntz encountered Tony Schwartz, a legendarily eccentric consultant (he rarely leaves his apartment) who is still best known for the television ad he did for Lyndon Johnson's Presidential campaign in 1964. (It was the one that showed a little girl plucking the petals off a daisy, and expertly garrotted Johnson's opponent, Barry Goldwater, without even mentioning him.) In 1973, Schwartz published a book called "The Responsive Chord," in which he declared that the way to persuade people is not to present them with a new thought but to find out what they already think (e.g., Goldwater has an itchy trigger finger) and tap into it. "I literally sat at Tony Schwartz's feet, for three sessions," Luntz told me. "No one touches him. Ever has. Ever will." The purpose of his research sessions with voters, he says, is Schwartzian: to derive political language from them, reprocess it, and then play it back to a mass audience.

I asked Luntz if there was a way I could enter a true Word Lab, in which political rhetoric was manufactured. "Why doesn't The New Yorker sponsor a focus group on language?" he said. I took this proposal back to the magazine, which agreed to pay Luntz's out-of-pocket expenses if he'd agree not to charge a fee on top of that.

The event took place on a Tuesday evening late in the summer, in Towson, Maryland, a middle-class suburb of Baltimore, at the office of an outfit called Assistance in Marketing. I sat behind a one-way mirror, looking into a windowless, fluorescent-lit room with a semicircle of folding chairs. A dozen subjects filed in and sat down. By Luntz's design, they were all white, all in their thirties, forties, and fifties, all voters in the 1996 Presidential election, and all educated past high school. Also, Luntz had barred self-described liberals from the group, to correct for the tendency of Marylanders to skew to the left of the country as a whole. Focus groups are meant to compensate for the main deficiency of polls, which is that they can't pick up on any aspect of voter consciousness which lies outside the questions asked. The participants in a focus group should be able to free-associate, more or less, under the prodding of the leader. The group has to be homogeneous enough to reveal the shadings of opinion within one category of voters.

Luntz walked into the room and asked the subjects to introduce themselves: Melody, a church secretary; Don, retired; Bob, a computer contractor; Gary, in refrigeration; John, an electrical designer; Barry, an accountant; Lew, another accountant; Madeline, a retired art teacher; Karen, who was home-schooling her kids; Alan, who was studying to be an elementary-school teacher; Nanci, yet another accountant; and Tim, a general contractor.

"I want to give you a word, and I want you to tell me how you'd define it," Luntz said. "If someone said 'quality of life,' what would it mean to you?"

People threw out phrases: "A comfortable living." "Health care." "Security." "Comfort zone." "Safety." "Not having to worry." "Not eking out a living."

"Which is more important?" Luntz asked them. "I don't want you to tell me what you think I want to hear. I want you to tell me the truth. Physical condition or money and finances? Who would say physical?" Nearly all the hands went up. Luntz grinned. "Bullshit! You talked to me about money! You did not say 'health.' You said 'money.' "

That loosened them up. After they talked for a few minutes about their worries-crime, drugs, bad schools, debt, errant children-Luntz said, "When I say the word 'government,' what comes to mind first?" He went around the semicircle, pointing at the people one by one.

"I guess the President and the Vice- President, the staff, the Senate, the House, those kinds of things," Melody said.

"Controlling," Don said.

"Providing security for people," Bob said.

"Laws," Gary said.

"Bureaucracy," John said.

"Wasteful bureaucracy," Barry said.

"Laws," Lew said.

"Bureaucracy," Madeline said.

"Corruption," Karen said.

"Liars," Alan said.

"Corruption," Nanci said.

"A lot of regulations," Tim said. "A lot of stuff that I don't need to put up with. They could leave me alone a little bit. I would be a bigger company if I could have two things: a little less law, and a little more help."

Luntz's eyes lit up. Language production! "Hmm," he said. "That's an interesting phrase." He turned from Tim to address the whole group. "What's your reaction to that phrase?"

Tim's phrase-"a little less law and a little more help"-did, indeed, seem to open a vein, and the group spent a good while talking about how awful government, laws, and politicians were. Elected officials were all crooks, they were bought and paid for by special interests, they cared only about power. Luntz asked the group how many would like to see the entire Congress thrown out of office. Six hands went up.

After some more talk, Luntz went to an easel and wrote five words: "Opportunity," "Community," "Responsibility," "Accountability," "Society"-those good "-ity" words. "When you think of what matters most to you in life," he asked, "of all of these, which matters most to you?" When he canvassed people's opinions, "opportunity" won, "accountability" was second, and "community" was last.

Luntz asked what the word "opportunity" meant to people, and as they called out answers he wrote snatches of wording on his easel: "right to choose," "personal control," "no obstacles," "everyone gets a chance," "founding principle of the country." Then the group voted among these phrases. "Founding principle" won, "everyone gets a chance" was second, and "right to choose" was third. Luntz handed out a sheet of paper to the subjects and ducked into the room where I was sitting. "You have the Republican and Democratic definitions of opportunity right there," he said. "The Republican is 'right to choose,' and the Democratic is 'everyone gets a chance.' Individual versus global."

The sheet of paper was an exercise on inheritance taxes. He asked people what they would most want to eliminate: an estate tax, an inheritance tax, or a death tax. Death tax won big. They vented for a while about how deeply unfair it was: you work hard your whole life and the government takes it all away at the end. Then Luntz asked them how much they thought you were allowed to pass on after your death without incurring a tax. All the non-accountants guessed way too low. He told them that the actual figure was six hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars. "Now that you know that," Luntz said, "would anyone not want to abolish the tax?" Nobody raised a hand.

The point here was that if you introduce a subject using language that will produce a strong opinion no subsequent information will get people to change their minds. By way of delivering the coup de grace, Luntz said, "Bill Gates-his children. Billions! Tens of billions if we abolish this tax! Ross Perot. Steve Jobs. Should they have to pay a death tax?" Only one vote changed.

After the session was over, we made a dash to the Baltimore/Washington International Airport, arriving at the gate, in accordance with company policy at Luntz Research, just before the final boarding call. On our flight to Newark, we talked about what Luntz thought the lessons of the focus group were.

"There's a lot of fear just beneath the surface," he said. "Voters are better off than they were five years ago, but what are they looking for? That safety net. That's why health care and prescription drugs matter so much. One of the candidates is going to figure out how to put health care in quality-of-life terms. Al Gore's got the right issue, but not the right rhetoric. He's got to personalize it. He's got to talk about his son and how grateful he is that he had health care. He should say, 'No amount of money can buy that peace of mind.'"

Luntz went on, "If I'm George Bush? I heard the phrase 'Don't we have enough laws?' 'Under Clinton-Gore, we passed x laws. Isn't that enough? Maybe, just maybe, people would be a little freer. A little more opportunity. The sad thing, Al, is that every time you pass a law someone loses a little freedom.' "

Sometimes, on a plane at night, isolated from the ordinary markers of time and place, you can get into a hopped-up, soaring mental state, and Luntz's face shone as he caromed from thought to thought. He got onto the subject of Bush's proposed tax cut, and why it was playing negatively, even though voters hate paying taxes. "That's simple," he said. "If he defends the numbers, he loses. If he personalizes it, he wins big. Congressional Republicans get dragged into the numbers. They appear on the Sunday talk shows and talk about numbers. It's like quicksand: the more you struggle, the deeper you sink."

Luntz's customary suppressed smile turned into a big beam. He liked that phrase. "The quicksand theory of taxation communication," he said. "It'll stick. I'll bet you a thousand dollars: someone will use it within twenty-one days of its appearing in your publication. Because 'taxation' and 'communication' rhyme, people will remember. Also, the word 'quicksand' is very visual. And a great fear. It's how people don't want to die."

Here came a new thought. Sinking in quicksand is a television and movie trope. Has anyone ever actually seen quicksand in real life? Is there even such a thing as quicksand? It doesn't matter: the image is so powerful that its lack of a factual basis is no impediment to its viability. Luntz jumped, triumphantly, to the over-all lesson. "Perception is reality," he said. "In fact, perception is more real than reality."

To venture inside a Word Lab is to lose your virginity: life isn't ever quite the same again. It becomes impossible to listen to prominent politicians speak without being aware of how much of what you're hearing is Word Lab product. Did the phrase "Real Plans for Real People" just pop into George Bush's head one day? Did Al Gore become outraged about prescription-drug prices for seniors just because they're outrageous? Did President Clinton build the "bridge to the twenty-first century" all by himself?

It won't do, however, to take the position that politics used to be high-minded and substantive and has been ruined by manufacturers of perception. The Word Lab, in various guises, has been around for a very long time. Rhetoric, Plato has Socrates say, "has no need to know the truth about things but merely to discover a technique of persuasion, so as to appear among the ignorant to have more knowledge than the expert." Half a century ago, George Orwell, in "1984," presented the manipulation of language as one of the scariest features of a totalitarian society. Luntz, who is a big Orwell fan, told me that when he read "1984" as a young man, he found it so absorbing that he brought it to a White Sox game in Chicago, couldn't stop reading, and twice missed Greg Luzinski hitting a ball out of Comiskey Park.

But, if rhetoric is old, focus groups are relatively recent-so recent that I was able to lend a videotape of the Towson focus group to the man who invented them, the eminent sociologist Robert K. Merton. Just before Pearl Harbor, a colleague brought him in to help the federal government test audience response to morale-building government radio programs, and what Merton would still prefer to call "the focused group-interview" was born.

Today, Merton is a University Professor emeritus at Columbia, and lives and works in an apartment on Riverside Drive, close to the university. He has been building up ill feeling about the misuse of his creation for many years, so when I spoke with him I was plainly tapping into a substantial reservoir. We talked in his apartment, in a small room filled with books and papers. On the walls were framed honorary degrees from places like Harvard, Yale, and Oxford. Merton

's conversation is, in effect, footnoted: he often stops himself at an important point, goes to a file, and pulls out the supporting research paper.

"There's so much hokum in focus groups, at times bordering on fraud," he said. "There are now professional focus-group subjects who get themselves on lists. Even when the subjects are well selected, focus groups are supposed to be merely sources of ideas that need to be researched." Merton pointed out several ways in which he considered Luntz's method to be nonstandard. He asked me to check on the method for finding the participants, and it turned out that some of them came from a database maintained by the office where the focus group was held, and might have been in focus groups before. There was no formal report of the findings, and therefore no independent review or testing of the findings, either. There was no clear way to determine how well the resulting rhetoric worked, once candidates began to use it, except to declare, ex post facto, that the winner's slogans had been works of genius and the loser's idiotic. Luntz's own techniques didn't accord with the techniques Merton had established in the forties.

How should he have run the group? "You'd take statements by candidates," Merton said. "You'd say, 'Here's a statement by Congressman Jones. What comes to mind?' Get people to talk about actual experiences. When Luntz asked them to respond to the phrase 'quality of life,' they were improvising about an abstraction, not reporting on their actual experiences. These people are role-playing, as members of a focus group."

Merton makes a persuasive case that Luntz's Word Lab is not a true example of social-science research. So what is it?

Anybody who has to speak regularly to live audiences sees that some combinations of words do produce more and better reactions than others, and starts using those combinations of words more often. That's a feedback mechanism, in which the audience affects the speaker's use of language. A very select few get to use people like Frank Luntz, who combine audience feedback, speechwriting, and-the extra element-a research technique that at least wears scientific garb and just might have some scientific power, even if it's not used according to Merton's rules.

What propels politicians toward Word Labs is insecurity, about what voters really want and about how to talk to them. In the heyday of machine politics, you found out what voters wanted by asking state bosses, who found out by asking city bosses, who found out by asking ward bosses, who found out by asking precinct captains. Now that television rather than party machinery is the principal means of communication with the electorate, everything depends on persuading people you can't see, and who are weakly attached to politics anyway, through the use of a very few words and images. Consultants are the shamans in the political tribe-the ones who, through some combination of technical knowledge and good intuition, can supply verbiage that might make the difference between winning and losing. Would you dare not to use the Word Lab, if you were running for office?

The best explanation I've heard for how a Word Lab achieves its effect on voters came from George Lakoff, a cognitive linguist at the University of California, Berkeley. "Frank Luntz?" Lakoff said when I called him up. "I have his book right here in front of me. Luntz has an amazing ear. As a linguist, I look at him and say, 'He knows how to frame the debate.' "

Lakoff explained that Luntz and people like him are, without realizing it, working in a field called frame semantics, which was developed in the seventies by a linguist named Charles Fillmore. Rattling around inside the human mind are collections of related words that linguists call semantic fields. The semantic field for politics and government would include words like "tax," "politician," "Congress," and "program." Fillmore hypothesized that these semantic fields are produced by mental "frames" and that, with just the right phrase, you can get all the words in the political semantic field to click neatly into place in one frame or another. "Risky tax scheme" is meant to activate a frame in which voters associate Republicans with financial instability, and "Washington politician" is supposed to activate a frame in which voters are suspicious of government and, perhaps, of Democrats, as the party of government. The words "choice" and "life" activate two different frames for organizing the semantic field for abortion.

A few years ago, Lakoff wrote a book called "Moral Politics," in which he said that the way to understand the two parties, rhetorically, is through the analogy of the nation to a family. Conservatives use a "strict father" frame and liberals use a "nurturant parent" frame. Words like "coddle" and "backbone," for example, activate the strict-father frame. Words like "care" and "health" activate the nurturant-parent frame. Because swing voters have elements of both the strict-father and the nurturant-parent frames, the way to capture them is to find a word or phrase that will cause the semantic field for politics and government to snap into one or the other frame. Lakoff, who is a liberal-whoops! "Progressive"-helped start an organization in Washington called the Frameworks Institute, which is meant to be a Word Lab for the other team.

Since the whole point of a Word Lab is to find out what voters already think and then design rhetoric to persuade them that politicians agree with it, the process leads to politicians' being shaped by, rather than shaping, public opinion. Especially in peaceable, prosperous times like these, the Word Lab pushes candidates toward a peculiar kind of convergence. Gore, somehow, had to have a tax-cut plan because Bush had one, and Bush had to have a prescription-drug plan because Gore had one. (And now each is accusing the other of wanting to create a

Washington H.M.O. for prescription drugs.) Inside Luntz's Word Lab, you can sense a powerful middle-class ideology that politicians today must accommodate. In shorthand, it is that government as a general proposition is operationally horrible and must always be attacked, never defended, but every specific thing government does is precious and can never be questioned. Public undertakings must be explicitly aimed at helping ordinary families who have strong values-nobody else-but then it's O.K. to bid frantically for votes, with the bidding expressed as the promise of new and generous government benefit programs.

Yes, all right, there are divisive, troublesome issues in America that we've swept under the rug. One day, we'll get around to them! But now it's campaign season, and the Word Lab rules. Washington politicians (if they were allowed to say what they think) might complain about that, but I've been listening to the American people-real people, not elitist phonies-and I say, what's wrong with it? My dad, a hardworking senior, feels the same way, and so do my two sons, who are children and will, with luck, exist in America's future. My wife, who happens to be another hardworking member of the middle class, agrees. Listening to us talk about what we want, playing it back to us at campaign time, and then governing so as to fulfill the promises that have been fashioned from snatches of our language-now, isn't that what responsible, realistic reform is all about?