

# Mass Media Affects on Language: Analysis of William Safire's Column

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The agenda-setting perspective of mass communication looks at the mass media to examine the agenda it sets and how users of the mass media adopt that agenda as their own (McCombs, 1992). Current English, as a discipline, is concerned with the English that is being used at the present by speakers of English, especially by members of the mass media (Dunham, 1992). More specifically, therefore, current English is a function of the social issues reflected in the mass media and the language used to talk about those issues.

Combining the two perspectives (agenda setting and current English) would lead to a prediction that the mass media affect language, specifically English. In other words, one would expect that because the mass media affect how people think about the mass media agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 1993), the mass media would also affect the language that people use when thinking about and discussing those agendas.

In an effort to establish support for the notion that the mass media affect language as well as topics and to discover some specific affects, this study looked at the "On Language" columns of William Safire. The study was designed to take advantage of the insights that he has gained from his years of language analysis and to develop a model from which future research can approach the study of mass media affects on language.

## METHOD

The methods used in this study were quite simple. This study examined 55 of William Safire's "On Language" columns from January 1992 through April 1993. There was no *a priori* method of analysis at the outset except to read all the columns and to be sensitive to patterns and information that emerged from looking at his columns. After all of the columns were read, the data were laid out and categorized.

## RESULTS

Seven Safire columns were language items clearly generated by the mass media. This is

the most obvious way that the mass media can affect English: by creating and disseminating change.

A total of 26 (about 47%) of Safire's columns contained language items that were generated by non-media sources but were reported or used by the mass media. This is another way that the mass media are involved in language change (i.e. the mass media disseminate the change throughout the users). Even though a non-media person rather than the media themselves may do something that changes the language, the media are often involved in spreading that change.

The two terms "no-fly zone" and "ethnic cleansing" are good examples of the mass media helping to disseminate new terms. Because these two terms are central to the meaning and explanation of their respective news items, they were picked up by the media and spread throughout the language as a result. As reported by Safire, no-fly zone was first spoken by an anonymous speaker of "pentagonese," and the mass media used it in their reports of the airspace that was off-limits to Iraqi aircraft. Now the term has become familiar to most speakers of English.

Similarly, ethnic cleansing was first used by a Serbian building supervisor in his description of what was happening in areas of what used to be Yugoslavia. The media picked up the term and used it to effectively portray the situation there. Now it is a common term of the English language.

Safire's writings gave a strong sense that many people's manner of speaking is influenced by the mass media. Four of Safire's columns were about language items that represent this combination of reporting and generating by the media. This is the case because the person who spoke the words did so while talking to members of the mass media and the line of distinction between media and non-media involvement was not so clear. This was a chicken-and-egg syndrome in that the mass media seemed to affect the language that they were reporting, but who influenced whom first is not clear. In other words, the mass media have become so pervasive in our lives that our manner of thinking and speaking, languagewise, is constantly influenced by them. People, especially newsmakers, tend to speak in sound bites or in ways that can be easily reported by the media or that capture a complex meaning in a few words. (However, former president George Bush is one obvious exception according to Herbeck (1933).)

In looking at the specific language affects where the mass media were involved, they can be categorized into three groups: new language, changes in meaning, and changes in usage. The total of these three types of media involvement is 37, or about 67%, of Safire's columns where the media were involved in language changes. Of the remaining columns, 13 were clearly unrelated to the media, and five were in an unknown or other

category.

### **New Language**

In terms of the 37 media related language changes that Safire wrote about, 15 dealt with the creation of new words/terms. Two of his columns dealt with new terms that were based on political changes in the world. The Commonwealth of Independent States is a new English term that resulted in the breakup of the former Soviet Union. The other political change has to do with the European Community changes. Eurotrain, Eurosausage, and Euroskeptics are some examples of new terms resulting from these changes.

Other new language is the result of general changes in society. *Homekeeper* was created to denote the fact that a person is not married to a house and that people live in many types of dwellings besides houses. *The third way* denotes the fact that people don't always have to settle for the two choices that are usually offered. *Declinism* is a different way of labelling the pessimistic way that some people view economic problems.

Technology changes also have caused changes in the language. *Virtual reality* itself is a new technology and the term for it. Other new technologies have created the need for retronyms. In the same way that digital watches created the need for "analog watch" and electric guitars created "acoustic guitar," fax, voice, and computer electronic mail have created *snail mail* to denote the older style of sending mail.

Other language changes reflect overall changes in society that are related to both social and technological changes. Safire noted a tendency to turn adjectives into nouns to save time and space. Two examples are that decaffeinated coffee has become *decaf* and floppy disk has become *floppy*.

Sometimes the new language terms are new combinations of old words. *Family values*, for example, has been created by members of the Republican Party as a code word for moral traditionalism that implies that the Democrats "seek to undermine the institution of the family." *Growing down* the government or the deficit has become the new term for reducing things. The post-fix "gate" has been invoked to denote scandal in the fashion of the Watergate scandal of former president Nixon.

### **New Meaning**

Twenty-one of Safire's columns dealt with new meanings for existing words/terms. Some examples include *bungee jumping* as a term to denote risky undertaking. *Third World* was noted in his column as having been used to mean unprofessional. In addition to its many past uses, *Mickey Mousing* can also be used to denote loony, outlandish, or cartoony behavior. As reported by Safire, one-sided victories have been referred to as *blowouts*. He also noted that *Movin' on* was used to denote forgetting the past and beginning things anew from today.

## Syntax Changes

Nine of Safire's columns dealt with different kinds of syntactic changes in the language. One example is the use of a special exclamation "not" at the end of a sentence to make it a negative sentence. In other words, if you didn't see someone, you could say "I saw her, not!"

Another is the use of the word "do" as a "teasing transitive verb" as in "let's do lunch." One of the most common syntactic changes, according to Safire, is in the misuse of pronouns. An MTV commercial noted that "Bill Clinton faces the generation that hold the future in their hands." Technically, generation is singular and the pronoun "their" is not in agreement; however, there is a slight difference in the connotative meaning, which Safire conceded may be more appropriate and, therefore, acceptable.

Another change is in the dropping of the "ed" ending on many adjectives. Iced tea has become "ice tea" and corned beef has become "corn beef." In this regard, Safire stated that "ears are sloppy and eyes are precise; accordingly, speech can be loose but writing should be tight."

These are the main examples of the Safire columns that showed the mass media's involvement in changes in the English language.

## DISCUSSION

What can we conclude from this examination of Safire's columns? Words are powerful; they capture lots of information in a small space. In that vein, Safire thoroughly examined the language being used and he found that language changes come about in an effort to best describe a particular reality or situation. The fact that most of these language changes were found in the mass media indicates the importance of the mass media in current English and shows how the mass media affect English.

The media's role in influencing English is threefold. The first role, especially in the area of advertising, is that the mass media create language in the form of vocabulary and usage.

Second, the mass media are a conduit for transmitting language changes to its audiences. By reporting and repeating the language of newsmakers, and other people, the media promote or facilitate the spread of language changes. It is both a reflector and perpetrator of current English. Further, the people who work and write, for the media are members of the cultures that use the language, thereby extending that reflection and perpetration of current English.

Third, and just as importantly, the mass media are ubiquitous and seem to exert a force

compelling everyone to speak in “sound bites.” Whether the chicken came first or the egg is not clear; however, as the mass media have become more powerful and “ever-present,” people, especially newsmakers, have come to speak using as few words as possible to convey as much as possible and to communicate their meaning as precisely as possible. Commercials are good examples of this phenomenon, and it often seems that people are making commercials when they speak. Possibly the most important aspect of current English and the mass media is that the words used to label and describe things have a strong influence on how we perceive and evaluate those things. (For example, the concept of family values can be either supportive of parents or an attempt to deny the plurality and breadth of society.)

Inductively, the same dynamics of English mass media involvement in the evolution of the culture’s language should apply to any society or language group that has an extensive mass media system.

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