3. Developing Concepts

Naming the Classes

As you compose statements, what you want to say and why you want to say it determine how you name the classifications you are developing in the process of forming concepts. The names you give the classes—a class is the field of a concept's application—represent the way you see the relationships, your judgment of them. Solzhenitsyn could have said that zeks are *people who are starving to death in labor camps.* Naming the class that way would not change the reference; the people are the same as *those who could devour prehistoric lizards with pleasure.* What Solzhenitsyn's naming does is to express his feelings and to represent his judgment of the state of affairs. The way a writer names the classes is one of his or her chief means of expressing judgment, of implying evaluation; the naming of classes is an essential phase in the making of meaning.

Suppose you are to make a statement about a *marsh.* If you are seeking the legal right to drain the marsh in order to build a shopping center, it will be to your advantage to classify the marsh as a valueless, worthless, entirely useless tract of land for which you have discovered redeeming purposes. In your statements, it will be useful to name the marsh a *swamp,* which obviously belongs to the class of things named *useless ground.* Since *swamp* brings to mind yellow fever, rattlesnakes, cold feet, Bad Indians, scum, stinky water, etc., that term furthers your purposes by establishing a context in which your scheme for a parking lot will be easy to classify as a "worthwhile project." If, on the other hand, you are a birdwatcher or a citizen interested in land use, it will suit your legal or moral purposes to refer to the marsh as *wetlands.* Indeed, that word has recently been invented by amalgamating *wet* and *land* to serve the needs of people who oppose draining marshes. A marsh is a marsh is a marsh: it can be defined as a member of that class of topographical areas that are subject to periodic flooding, have a very high water table, are perpetually wet, etc., but how you name the marsh—how you "call" it—will be determined by how you want it to be interpreted; your choice of a name for *marsh* will help to determine the opinions of your audience or readers. The name you give the marsh doesn't change the marsh itself, but it powerfully controls the concept of marsh that you want your audience to form.

Speaker	*Interest of speaker (from his/her viewpoint)*	*Concept*	*Class-name*
Businessman	Progress	Completely worthless land, in current condition	Swamp
Birdwatcher	Conservation	Area vitally important to the ecological system	Wetlands

Using the schema above, develop two different class-names for the following (particulars):

- A cross-town expressway
- An oral contraceptive developed under the auspices of the United Nations
- A public university admitting all high school graduates
- Guaranteed annual income

Compose a 100-word statement to be printed on a flyer in support of or in opposition to one of the above.

You don't have to introduce a statement with a phrase like "In my judgment . . ." in order to pass judgment any more than you have to announce that you are classifying: naming classes entails evaluation. For that reason, when it is to the advantage of the speaker/writer not to reveal just what his evaluation is, class-names are often opaque or neutral. One of the chief uses of jargon is to provide all-purpose class-names: *area, problem, problem-area, situation, parameters, trouble, matter, decision-making process, system.* With a little help from such noises as "in my judgment," "really," "in terms of," you can handle almost any question:

> Well, that's a very important problem area. How we handle that situation, just what parameters we work with, should be, in my judgment, a matter for an open decision-making process. The American people deserve nothing less.

When this process serves the purpose of deception, language is corrupted. In one of the most famous passages of modern journalism, George Orwell comments on the relationship of political attitudes and the corruption of language.

> In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of political parties. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenseless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called *transfer of population* or *rectification of frontiers*. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called *elimination of unreliable elements*. Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them. Consider for instance some comfortable English professor defending Russian totalitarianism. He cannot say outright, "I believe in killing off your opponents when you can get good results by doing so." Probably, therefore, he will say something like this:
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> > "While freely conceding that the Soviet régime exhibits certain features which the humanitarian may be inclined to deplore, we must, I think, agree that a certain curtailment of the right to political opposition is an unavoidable concomitant of transitional periods, and that the rigors which the Russian people have been called upon to undergo have been amply justified in the sphere of concrete achievement."

Orwell's analysis of the relationship of political attitudes and the use of language to camouflage or promote them has not been surpassed. "Politics and the English Language" is very widely quoted and not infrequently by people whose writing

seems to exemplify the very manipulations of language Orwell excoriates. This suggests that, though we might all agree that the examples Orwell presents are indeed contemptible and although we can easily find comparable examples in the rhetoric of others, we cannot always recognize those manipulations and evasions when we ourselves are speaking or writing about issues or experiences that we are involved with, especially when we are out to persuade others of our view.

It's true that politicians—as Orwell implies, the chief sinners—twist and stretch language; they don't say what they mean; they are deliberately obscure; they mislead, on purpose—but what if we agree with the purpose? If a politician, goaded by journalists, holds his ground but keeps them guessing just what it is, do we never applaud? Naming the classes so that some people can see things one way and others can think of them another way is using the resources of language for purposes that may or may not be honorable. *Equivocation*—literally, "speaking in two voices" or, as movie Indians say, "with forked tongue"—is no less necessary to lawyers, preachers, editorialists, lovers, parents, children, teachers than it is to the politician: we are all equivocators. *Casuistry* is the art of stretching language to cover more than it ordinarily would or narrowing it so that it covers less than it is expected to. The casuist tries to keep a conflict alive—or to smother it—by renaming, restating, redefining. Or he may attempt to resolve a conflict by letting one client/interest group/constituency think that he means X, another that he means Y; he tries to satisfy one without exactly betraying the other; he protects and defends without, perhaps, acknowledging danger or guilt. If we do not gain from the maneuver, we tend to sneer at the casuist or condemn him as a liar; when he's one of us, we may smile at his cleverness and salute his brilliance.

Casuistry is cognate with *case*, which in medicine, law, and logic is a falling—"the way things fell out"—a situation, or happening. Addressing oneself to a case is the fundamental meaning of casuistry, which from the first carried with it the notion of arguing by means of exploiting the resources of language. The first casuists were moral counselors who were charged with resolving conflicts in cases where the choice between two duties was complex. This frequently meant protecting certain values from the attacks of those whose motives were not above suspicion.

> Then went the Pharisees, and took counsel how they might entangle him in his talk.
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> And they sent out unto him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, Master, we know that thou art true, and teachest the way of God in truth, neither carest thou for any man: for thou regardest not the person of man.
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> Tell us therefore, What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?
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> But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, Why tempt ye me, ye hypocrites?
>
> Shew me the tribute money. And they brought unto him a penny.
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> And he saith unto them, Whose is this image and this superscription?
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> They say unto him, Caesar's. Then saith he unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.
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> When they had heard these words, they marvelled, and left him, and went their way.
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> Matthew XXII, 15–22

You can contrast this casuistry with another example in which one politician draws a distinction only to have another politician try to obscure the line being drawn.

> At one point in a public hearing last week, Senator Frank Church of Idaho, the Democratic chairman of the intelligence committee, posed one position:
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> "I think we should recognize the distinction between war and peace, and it poses the question whether this country in peacetime wants to live always under the customs of war."
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> Senator John G. Tower of Texas, the Republican vice chairman, quickly responded with the other side:
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> "I think to make a fine distinction on a matter of war and peace ignores the fact that we are confronted in this world by a very powerful adversary that would not hesitate to resort to military means to achieve its political objectives, a powerful adversary that itself through its clandestine activities and overt activities generates military activity all over the world to accomplish political ends. . . . So I think that we cannot draw this in strict terms of war and peace, in terms of whether or not the United States is actually at war. We are in effect in a war of sorts. That is a war of

preservation of the climate in this world where national integrity will be respected."

The New York Times, November 11, 1975

What a student of composition can learn in studying equivocation and casuistry is that ambiguities can be good or bad. In an ambiguous statement, the possibility of more than one interpretation is more apparent than it usually is. When we judge ambiguities, interpreting them one way or another, we are judging the speaker's (or writer's) purpose. When you are composing, you are the speaker and the audience; studying ambiguities is one of the best ways to learn to listen in on the inner dialogue. Judging the speaker's purpose—what he intended to say—is a philosophical matter, since it involves us in judgments of meaning: *purpose* and *intention* are two of the principal meanings of *meaning*. And, of course, getting lost in that thicket is very easy. Sometimes, in order to find our way out (or to lose someone else) we dismiss arguments over meaning as being themselves meaningless: "Oh, it's just a matter of semantics." And, of course, "it" is—whatever "it" is: all linguistic forms are by nature and function dependent on meaning (*semantics* is the study of meaning), which is in turn created by a speaker's purpose, a context, an interpreter's need and expectation, the kind of language being spoken, and the speech community in which the communication is going on. Nevertheless, some questions are "merely verbal": one good test of whether or not the problem in an argument is a "matter of words" or "just semantics" is the ease with which a compromise is accepted. If a third term is quickly and happily agreed upon by the arguers, then it probably was a *quibble*. (A *quibble* is a confusion of words, sometimes for purposes of evading an issue, sometimes for the sake of humor, in which case it is called a *pun*.) But more often than not, what someone wants to dismiss as "a question of semantics" will turn out to be the heart of the matter.

A philosopher named Mortimer J. Adler once wrote a book called *How to Read a Book;* another philosopher named I. A. Richards responded with a book called *How to Read a Page.* Here is a passage in which Richards discusses the matter of ambiguity:

> . . . The *systematic* ambiguity of all our most important words is a first cardinal point to note. But "ambiguity" is a sinister-looking word and it is better to say "resourcefulness." They are the most important words for two reasons:

> 1. They cover the ideas we can least avoid using, those which are concerned in all that we do as thinking beings.
> 2. They are words we are forced to use in explaining other words because it is in terms of the ideas they cover that the meanings of other words must be given. A short list of a hundred such words will help make these reasons for their importance clearer. . . . I have, in fact, left 103 words in this list—to incite the reader to the task of cutting out those he sees no point in and adding any he pleases, and to discourage the notion that there is anything sacrosanct about a hundred, or any other number.
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> AMOUNT ARGUMENT ART BE BEAUTIFUL BELIEF CAUSE CERTAIN CHANCE CHANGE CLEAR COMMON COMPARISON CONDITION CONNECTION COPY DECISION DEGREE DESIRE DEVELOPMENT DIFFERENT DO EDUCATION END EVENT EXAMPLE EXISTENCE EXPERIENCE FACT FEAR FEELING FICTION FORCE FORM FREE GENERAL GET GIVE GOOD GOVERNMENT HAPPY HAVE HISTORY IDEA IMPORTANT INTEREST KNOWLEDGE LAW LET LEVEL LIVING LOVE MAKE MATERIAL MEASURE MIND NAME NATION NATURAL NECESSARY NORMAL NOTION NUMBER OBSERVATION OPPOSITE ORDER ORGANIZATION PART PLACE PLEASURE POSSIBLE POWER PROBABLE PROPERTY PURPOSE QUALITY QUESTION REASON RELATION REPRESENTATIVE RESPECT RESPONSIBLE RIGHT SAME SAY SCIENCE SEE SEEM SENSE SIGN SOCIETY SORT SPECIAL SUBSTANCE THING THOUGHT TRUE USE WAY WISE WORD WORK

You can use this list as a reminder that all conceptual terms are problematic—open to question—since they cover a field. Differentiating ambiguity from quibbling is an important philosophical challenge for the writer.

Read #1b in Paragraph Sequence III, Jonathan Swift's famous satire on one solution to the problem of ambiguity (p. 240).

Writing instructions generally urge that a writer make himself "clear." What does that mean?

Consider Jules Feiffer's cartoon about the old man (or is he a Senior Citizen?). What is his complaint? Would he have Orwell's sympathy?

In Zimbabwe (Rhodesia), use of the word "native" is considered by the black people to be profoundly offensive; in the United States, some "Indians" now prefer to be called "Native Americans." Look up "native" and discuss the ambiguities of its use.

Read the following passage by the young German writer Peter Handke. Consider his analysis of the class-name "poverty" and then do the same sort of analysis, choosing two words that refer to to the same situation or event but that name different concepts, e.g., *barber/hair stylist; invasion/cross-border operation; juvenile delinquent/young hood.* Explain how these words are used and by whom.

> The word "poverty" was a fine, somehow noble word. It evoked an image out of old schoolbooks: poor but clean. Cleanliness made the poor socially acceptable. Social progress meant teaching people to be clean; once the indigent had been cleaned up, "poverty" became a title of honor. Even in the eyes of the poor, the squalor of destitution applied only to the filthy riffraff of foreign countries.
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> "The tenant's visiting card is his windowpane." And so the have-nots obediently bought soap with the money provided for that purpose by the progressive authorities. As paupers, they had shocked the official mind with repulsive, but for that reason palpable, images; now, as a reclaimed and cleansed "poorer class," their life became so unimaginably abstract that they could be forgotten. Squalid misery can be described in concrete terms; poverty can only be intimated in symbols.
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> Peter Handke, *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*

Details, Examples, Facts, Images

In naming the classes that emerge as you form concepts, you choose one word rather than another—*swamp* rather than