

Words, words, words

Even the parliamentarians are the very models of post-modernists

Chris Goddard

Words not only describe and define events, but also describe and define those who use them. Recent media coverage of the rescue of an American Air Force Captain from Serb-held Northern Bosnia, and the slaughter of a family in Melbourne by a severely disturbed man used the term 'Rambo' for both stories. In the same newspaper, the activities of child molesters in Asia were described under the heading 'Child love'. The importance of the words used to describe assaults on children was recognised in a recent Victorian Crime Prevention committee report.

Words have great power. They have the power to describe, to define, to expose and to change. This has long been treated as a truism and celebrated in statements that have become clichés, such as 'The pen is mightier than the sword'. Perhaps it is time to modernise this: 'The word processor can cause more collateral damage than the surface-to-air missile'.

As a recognised post-structural modernist (those who doubt my credentials should read Professor Threadgold's (1995) article in *The Age*), I recognise that the words we use and choose are as double-edged as swords can be: they describe, define and expose the narrator. This was brought home to me during my absence from these pages when reading the newspapers.

One story that caught my eye involved US Air Force Captain Scott O'Grady. He was shot down over Serb-held Bosnia but managed to evade those searching for him by hiding in a forest and living on rain water and ants.

The Americans discovered a sorely-needed hero, and Captain O'Grady's diet changed from bugs and rain drops to lunch with President Clinton. He was welcomed back to base with a ceremonial fly-past and a cake inscribed with the words 'Welcome Back Zulu'. The significance of the inscription escapes me, but leads us back to Melbourne, Australia.

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The second story had no heroes, only a clearly identified villain, and four frightened victims, all now dead. Gennaro Manna appears to have suffered from severe mental illness for a number of years. He turned his home into a fortress, equipped with bars and shutters, and guarded by a high fence and several Dobermans. He changed his name to Shaka, apparently after the Zulu King. On 7 July 1994, Manna destroyed his home, his family and himself. He shot his seven year old daughter through the neck, and then poured petrol over his wife, his other two young children and himself, and set fire to everything. The blaze was fed by more than 100 litres of flammable liquid, and all five people died.

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At first sight, these stories appear to have little in common, apart from violence and a Zulu connection. The sub-editors on *The Age*, however, discovered other commonalities. *The Age* (10 June 1995: 13) used the headline '*Improbable Rambo*' holds out until rescue to lead the O'Grady story. Manna's story appeared in the same edition on page ten under the headline *Rambo on road to ruin*.

To be fair to the sub-editors, the Rambo metaphors appear to have originated elsewhere. Manna was reported to have wandered the streets of suburban Boronia

wearing army fatigues, armed with a knife, 'looking like Rambo'. O'Grady, on the other hand, gained his 'Improbable Rambo' title from unidentified sources. Manna was also called Rambo in *The Herald Sun* (*From religion to Rambo*, 10 June 1995), but O'Grady's story appeared under *Tearful pilot thanks God*.

But the following Monday, *The Age* (12 June 1995) described O'Grady as a 'hero pilot', perhaps in response to O'Grady's insistence that he was no Rambo, but rather 'a scared little bunny rabbit trying to hide'. The story of Manna and the slaughter of his wife and children had disappeared.

The fact that those two men, in such different circumstances, on different sides of the world, should be given the same title tells us something about words and how we use them. It has long been argued that words do more than describe reality - rather they play a major role in creating it.

The media's choice of words to describe events and problems is important because, for many of us, there is no alternative source of information. Stereotypes are perhaps unavoidable in the haste to report, and create, news. The full complexity of every issue cannot be exposed in every story, every headline.

On the same day as *The Age* reported on the two Rambos, a lead story on the front page of the same edition of the same newspaper followed up the activities of child molesters in South Asia. *Child love, our sad part in it* was the unfortunate choice of headline, repeated in full on page four.

In fact, Murdoch's story is about child rape, child abuse and child prostitution, not 'child love'. His report is an account of despicable crimes that are savagely exploitative, not 'sad'. Surely, there can be no excuse for this sub-editor. Ironically, the claim that they love children is often the first line of defence for child molesters themselves.

'Child love' denies the brutal reality described in Lindsay Murdoch's piece. He described a photograph showing an eight year old girl crying as she was forced to perform oral sex. Another young girl recalled being beaten when she was sold for \$US50 to a brothel owner.

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So where did the term 'child love' come from? Perhaps it was used because we persist in describing those who commit such crimes as 'paedophiles'. From the Greek, the 'paedo' element means child, while the Macquarie Dictionary informs us that the 'philia' part is a noun-ending meaning 'fondness', 'craving' or 'affinity for', from the Greek word for loving. The equivalent, I insist, would be to call the rapist a gynophile, someone who loves or is fond of women.

Captain O'Grady is alive and took advantage of his health by trying to redefine the labels attached to him and his actions. Manna's victims died horrible

deaths at his hands and cannot object to descriptions of him as ambiguously heroic.

If the victims of the Australian child-molesters described in *The Age* are still alive, they are unlikely to read Victoria's troubled paper. Even so, those who exploit the children's vulnerability should not be allowed to re-define or minimise the horror of their actions. They should not be aided by journalists.

While *The Age* might be several sub-editors short of postmodernism, such an accusation cannot be laid at the door of our Victorian Parliament. In a word association test, let's face it, postmodernism is not likely to be the first thing that springs to mind when our present Victorian government is mentioned: economic irrationalism, welfare cuts, not-so-freeways and casinos are more likely contenders.

But all may not be as it appears to be. The Crime Prevention Committee of the Parliament of Victoria (chaired by the Honourable Kenneth M. Smith, MLC) in its recent report, *Combating Child Sexual Assault: An Integrated Model*, makes more than 100 recommendations. These recommendations cover a great deal of important territory, eg, that support services be provided to victims of sexual assault regardless of whether protective concerns exist (1995: 19-20); that a Sexual Assault Response Team pilot project be established; and that victims' services be coordinated.

For me, however, a central theme of the report is identified in the very first recommendation:

The committee recommends that the word 'significant' be defined within the Children and Young Persons Act, 1989 to ensure appropriate investigation. (1995: 18)

The report suggests that the term 'significant' is 'ambiguous' and allows protective services to 'deflect' children away from services. (The philosophy of Victoria's Health and Community Services

'deflecting' as many children as possible is further scrutinised later in the report.)

Violence against children that occurs in the home is not treated as seriously as 'domestic-based' violence against adults, according to the report:

Protective workers, police and the Children and Young Persons Act 1989 soften terms to describe assaults on children which does [sic] not reflect the experience of the child concerned. (1995: 14-15)

There is more:

The Child Protection Services manual speaks of 'harm' and in some protocols refers to assaults as 'maltreatment'. (1995: 15)

The Community Policing Squad is not squeaky clean either:

The Community Policing Squad training manual describes physical 'abuse' as including beatings, shaking, burns, human bite or grab marks, pinching, fractures, head or internal injuries, poisoning or death (Community Policing Squad Work Practices Manual 1.1 (Undated)). In circumstances outside the home, or where any adult received such treatment from another, this 'abuse' would be considered a criminal assault... (1995: 15)

The Committee concludes that 'euphemisms' should not be used when sexual assaults against children are being described. It is such a pity that no-one told the sub-editors at *The Age*. In their position, they should know that the words we use and the labels we choose say as much about the writer as the event. After all, in the stories described, 'child love' is as incongruous as 'Rambo' is ambiguous.

REFERENCES

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