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Meaning and public deception: a tale of more than 'very, very few people'

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As I write, we have the same Home Secretary as yesterday. But it might have been different. Yesterday, amid claims he had misled the public, a series of calls were made for the resignation of British Home Secretary Charles Clarke. As is common in such cases, the precise basis of the resignation calls remains slightly confused. What is clear is that Clarke had been publicly confronted on 25 April 2006 with the fact that a significant number of foreign nationals imprisoned in the UK had, on completion of their sentence, been released into the community rather than deported (as they should have been, according to a procedure already laid down). In his defence, Clarke pointed out that most of what was being talked about had taken place before he himself became Home Secretary. When pressed (during an evening interview for BBC2's *Newsnight*) on whether any prisoners had been mistakenly released *after* he had become Home Secretary, Clarke said he didn't have the number in front of him, so he was 'not prepared to say no one' but he could say it was, 'very, very few people'. Later the same evening, however, it emerged that the Home Office had already issued figures showing that 288 prisoners had been mistakenly released in the period since Clarke had become Home Secretary, out of a total of approximately a thousand. In the House of Commons and in subsequent media interviews, Clarke was accused of having misled the public by suggesting that he personally was responsible for only 'very, very few' prisoners being wrongly released. As was later pointed out in the House of Commons, official figures in fact showed that the rate of release of such prisoners had increased after Clarke was appointed, rather than the problem being at that point effectively over.

Calls for Clarke's resignation followed, expressed by some in terms of the incompetence of his department and leadership, and by others in terms of the more specific allegation that he had knowingly misled the public during the Newsnight interview. This second allegation is more personally incriminating, since it calls into question Clarke's integrity and so suitability for present or future office. Being based on an interpretation of what he said, this allegation of misleading the public forms what I find it helpful to call a 'meaning troublespot'.

The term 'meaning troublespot' is of course not a technical term. It is based on what I take to be a suggestive analogy between the personal, social and financial cost to protagonists in disputes about meaning in the public sphere and the social damage which results from directly physical conflicts. Disputes at such troublespots, where specific interpretations are contested, create a sort of interpretive gridlock: apparently no movement is possible in any direction, since nobody is willing to concede that an alternative meaning or significance of the disputed utterance is reasonable or even possible. Such disputes typically involve competing, alternative interpretations of a contested word, phrase or passage; and, significantly, there is rarely, if ever, a shortage of perceived meaning. What is contested instead is a crux that gives rise to alternative meanings between which some kind of arbitration needs to take place if anyone is to move on.

The 'meaning troublespot' crux in this instance, of course, is whether 'very, very few people' is consistent with 288 out of a total of nearly one thousand, roughly a third. 'Few' is relative, and 288 is certainly 'few' in relation to the national or global population. But when the numeric value of 'few' (let alone 'very, very few') is in the hundreds, and amounts to approximately one-third of a contextually definite overall number, it seems arguable that speech-community intuitions will not support the idea that this number can be glossed as 'very, very few'. Those intuitions of the speech community might incidentally be tested in a variety of ways, not only through direct elicitation but also through less direct, constructed experiments; and in the relevant published literature, the American linguist Michael Geis, for example, undertook an extensive study of the intersubjective consistency of so-called scalar implicatures prompted by quantifiers such as 'few' and 'many' in TV advertising as far back as the 1970s.¹

Interestingly, Charles Clarke's repetition of the intensifier 'very' in the phrase 'very, very few people' suggests that the number is not only small but also 'minimal' in the sense of being vanishingly insignificant. This is an intended rather than an accidental suggestion. The technique Clarke adopts here, of leading up to the phrase 'very, very few people' with the preliminary suggestion that he is 'not prepared to say no one', may be viewed as a strategy to draw attention to the speaker's scrupulousness: the speaker signals reluctance to commit himself to a specific number because he can't be confident that number is accurate, before going on to commit himself to an alternative. This is a sort of making explicit – in case anyone might not think it of a politician – of Paul Grice's quality maxim in communication: that a speaker says (only) what he or she has grounds for believing to be the case, with the conversationally important spin-off that inferences about the truth or falsity of related possible states of affairs can be reliably inferred, as implicatures. Drawing *explicit* attention to the speaker's integrity or probity is contrived, in this case, to reinforce the low number likely to be inferred when the speaker does commit himself to the general estimate, 'very, very few'. Compare the odd effect, for instance, of he was 'not prepared to say no-one but could say it was one-third of the total number'.

Embarrassing for Charles Clarke, certainly, but rather grand to call this a 'meaning troublespot'? Some people would say so. They might argue that you don't need to analyse such a comment in detail to see it is misleading. It is clearly, they would say, a deliberate deception by Clarke to cover his own backside; and you don't need a PhD to grasp that. (This argument for a 'common-sense' approach to meaning attribution is influential not only in everyday conversation, as it happens, but is also found in legal and regulatory approaches to determining meaning.) The benefit in saying straight out that Clarke's utterance is a deception, so the same people would suggest, is that of plain speaking: misleading people is no more than you would expect – that's what politicians do when they're on the ropes, so why mess about with proving it in minute detail?² More important to get on with the real business of life: the issue isn't whether Clarke tried to cover up the figure of 288 – that's just the knockabout of professional politics – but about potentially dangerous prisoners being released into society: an ongoing public safety

issue that has already cost lives. We should therefore focus our minds on things that are actually happening rather than retreating into semantics.

This is partly true, but the point remains that not everyone will agree with the account offered so far of Charles Clarke's utterance, and we don't have clear ways of arbitrating between alternative interpretations or investigating the issues at stake. People more sympathetic to Charles Clarke, for instance, counter the reading outlined above with the notion that, with the national prison population in the tens of thousands, 288 could be construed as 'very, very few people'; and in an aggressive media environment set on pulling down public figures, Clarke could be said to be acting understandably in trying to put an acknowledged difficulty in his department in perspective. What's to be gained, anyway, by trying to show that, faced with genuinely urgent problems in the world, one comment by a public figure during a TV interview doesn't match how all the members of its audience feel it's reasonable to describe something? Would anyone seriously want some sort of regulatory quango – a kind of semantic French Academy – to decide what specific number range is consistent with the expression 'very, very few'? Even linguists wouldn't, the argument might continue in more academic form, because to do so flies in the face of what we know about how meaning is typically modulated or calibrated in given contexts inferentially, rather than coming with an already fixed value: Quine's syncategorematic 'poor violinist' is not only different from a violinist who is poor, but, as modern lexical pragmatics has shown, will differ in musical ability depending on whether they are a poor violinist in a national orchestra or in a school pick-up band.³

The notion of 'meaning hotspot' emerges, then, from irreconcilability between competing interpretive accounts. Any such meaning hotspot, as you would expect, is about meaning: about how the strategies adopted by a speaker (whether an individual person or corporate 'speaker/author'), reflected in the choice of a certain form of words, direct the meaning that a listener will form, with those meaning effects distinguished from other, usually more general interpretations that consist of beliefs held almost irrespective of anything the speaker might have actually said. At the same time, such meaning hotspots are never *only* about meaning: they are always just one part in – a subplot of – some larger struggle over money or other form of capital. They are usually embedded in a longer piece of discourse, hedged around with other debatable comments

and ideas, and so dependent for meaning on features of their context in a particular publication or media broadcast; and this makes them difficult to isolate for close attention in their own right. Even where identifiable precisely, the meaning question at such ‘meaning troublespots’ will normally seem less important ultimately than the issues it refers to (in this case, potentially dangerous prisoners on the streets); and there is typically a question of whether someone complaining about public discourse does so because of an aggressive agenda of their own, as tabloid newspapers and polemical journalist clearly sometimes do. Often we don't get to know what the outcome of a meaning dispute is, either, because the interpretive crux is so tangled up with other issues that the overall situation finally moves on without the specific issue of meaning ever being resolved.

There are general issues to do with ‘meaning troublespots’, nevertheless, that give them an importance beyond any individual case. Meaning troublespots expose the important, underlying issue of what kind of communicative environment we think we’re living in. Is it the situation of general trust, with only marginal problems of fraud and deception, that Onora O’Neill eloquently outlined in her 2002 Reith lectures?⁴ Or is it naïve to imagine, especially in the hardball worlds of politics and commerce, that public figures and bodies keep to some standard of truthful communication, when ‘effective’ communication within a more pragmatic, neo-liberal worldview has risen so rapidly and so far up the public agenda, and when politicians in particular view themselves as embattled in relation to aggressive media adversaries (as Peter Osborne has convincingly shown is the case with New Labour⁵)? In a context of demonstrated, widespread loss of trust in public communication, should we be thinking of public communication less (or perhaps only residually) as a matter of Gricean cooperation and more a matter of spotting a speaker’s relevant self-interest – with claims to honesty in the public sphere heralding not Tony Blair's new start in public life but a new twist in meta-rhetorical cynicism?

We can only wait and see. In the meantime, ‘meaning troublespots’ may well remain of interest only to pedants who retreat into semantics and to legal ambulance-chasers. But it would be better if they became something that interests us all, as everyday questions of meaning that are an inevitable dimension of issues people prefer to think of as to do with ‘real events’.

Will we have the same Home Secretary tomorrow? When asked directly whether he knew the number of prisoners released on his watch was actually 288 at the time he took part in that crucial *Newsnight* interview, Clarke replied simply and professionally that during the interview he didn't have a sheet of paper in front of him with the number on it (6).

¹ See Michael Geis, *The Language of Television Advertising* (New York: Academic Press, 1982).

² There are many illuminating studies of political deception, tempting the view that this is an especially rich field. Perhaps the most interesting account of lying from an ethical point of view is still Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*. (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1978). A thought-provoking and sometimes moving account of modern British controversies, including the Belgrano, Westland helicopters and many others, is Tim Slessor, *Ministries of Deception: Cover-ups in Whitehall* (London: Aurum Press, 2002). More vividly polemical, but less probing, discussion can be found in Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber, *Weapons of Mass Deception: The Uses of Propaganda in Bush's War on Iraq* (London: Robinson, 2003). John B. Thompson's detailed study *Political Scandal* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2000) shows both historically and theoretically how lying typically constitutes a second-wave within political scandals that may begin by seeming to be about something else, such as sex or fraud. Roger Shuy's *Bureaucratic Language in Government and Business* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1998) traces a related phenomenon – evasive and opaque official discourse – through a series of US legal cases in which he was involved.

³ Discussion of just how fluid and variable lexical meanings are is especially associated with the work of François Recanati (e.g. his much-discussed discussion of 'rabbit' as contextually an animal, meat, fabric, etc.); the section on word meaning in William Croft and Alan Cruse's *Cognitive Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) gives an accessible, alternative account of problems in discriminating word senses. Ray Gibbs's *Intentions in the Experience of Meaning*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) examines processes of meaning attribution across many different fields, including law, literary criticism and art appreciation.

⁴ Baroness O'Neill's 2002 Reith lectures can still be heard at www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2002/, but were also published as Onora O'Neill, *A Question of Trust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁵ It is easy to dismiss Peter Osborne's The Rise of Political Lying (London: Free Press, 2005) as a journalistic hatchet job; but it is full of striking miniature case studies and develops an interesting historical argument about New Labour's communication excesses. Nicholas Jones's blow-by-blow accounts of New Labour lying, such as The Control Freaks: How New Labour Gets Its Own Way (London: Politico's Publishing, 2002), are also full of examples but less acute in analysis.<N>

6. Ten days later (on 5 May 2006), Charles Clarke was sacked from his post as Home Secretary in a cabinet re-shuffle. By this time, however, whether he had misled the public on this or similar occasions had become of interest to I am not prepared to say no-one but to 'very, very few people'.