

Philip Warton

Professor Azadeh Ganizadeh

English Composition

12 October 2018

Duality in Definition

Language is volatile and ever-changing, and even within the microscopic present, words can vacillate between one meaning and its complete opposite. Between motivation, expertise, and context, myriad factors may influence how ideas are shared through words. Whether it be by accident or intentionally, ideas can become conflated, misconstrued, and meaningless altogether when we fail to agree upon a single definition or meaning, leading to misunderstandings where there should be clarity. In some circumstances this failure to delineate meaning is trivial, but in many others, it is detrimental to society at large.

Even issues surrounding the fate of humankind can be blurred by arguments of definition. The first pairing discussed will be between *global warming* and *climate change*. These terms describe related ideas but are not entirely synonymous. Climate change describes a very general idea, the idea that weather patterns are changing globally as a result of the rising temperatures, whereas global warming simply refers to the rising temperatures themselves. NASA states, “Climate change refers to a broad range of global phenomena created predominantly by burning fossil fuels, which add heat-trapping gases to Earth’s atmosphere. These phenomena include the increased temperature trends described by global warming.” (NASA)

Motivation behind using one phrase or the other can come from a place of ignorance, or it can come with an agenda. Many look at weather in their hometown on a day to day basis and see little change or warming. A common (yet comical) argument presented is the following: If global warming exists, why is it snowing this year? This fallacious argument is created by an intentional failure to differentiate between weather, global warming, and climate change. Weather refers to what occurs in a localized area, at a specific time. The claim takes advantage of an ignorance from the audience regarding climate science and the relationship between these different trends, in order to further obscure the truth.

Operating on a similar wavelength is the debate between *lies* and *alternative facts*, one that relies on biases, agendas, and perspective. The origin of the phrase *alternative facts* is telling regarding its meaning and motivation. When White House Press Secretary, Sean Spicer, grossly exaggerated the popularity of President Trump's inauguration, Kellyanne Conway came to his defense. She claims that Spicer did not lie, but instead "gave alternative facts". The reporter speaking to Conway later asserted, "Alternative facts are not facts. They're falsehoods." The term is used to avoid admitting dishonesty and is inherently deceptive in the way that it portrays spreading misinformation as something acceptable. The term has sparked debate on the relevance of truth in the modern day. More than ever there are debates about if politicians are truthful, or if truthfulness matters at all?

Though the distinction between fact and fiction has been brought to question during this presidency, an issue directly affecting more individuals today is the politics surrounding immigration. Immigrants who live in the United States without legal permission to do so are often referred to as one of two things: *Illegal aliens* or *undocumented immigrants*. The IRS defines "alien" as any individual that is not a U.S. citizen, but in using the term another meaning

is often implied. The word “alien” makes something seem completely foreign, other, and even frightening, and “illegal” has connotations of criminality and violence. *Illegal alien* is often said by those who are strongly against this kind of illegal immigration, because it implies that these individuals are strange, and potentially dangerous. *Undocumented immigrant* has much less sensationalist phraseology and is often the term used by those who are more in favor of such immigration.

Such euphemisms support the rhetoric in favor of a particular side of an issue. Though semantically synonymous, the terms *capital punishment* and *the death penalty* do not invoke the same emotions. By avoiding the word “death”, the phrase *capital punishment* makes the idea seem less morbid than it truly is. Those in support of this form of punishment frequently use the term in order to portray the law as something more palatable. Similarly, those who choose to “go under the knife” for aesthetic reasons may refer to the operation as *cosmetic surgery* rather than *plastic surgery*, because the word “plastic” invokes undesirable qualities, such as fakeness and a likeness to toys.

The purpose of using one phrase instead of another is sometimes transparent, but sometimes motivations are more nuanced and complex. Many times there is no way to differentiate between a lack of knowledge and an intentional misinterpretation. Regardless of reason, these different phrasings and definitions have implications. Using a certain wording recklessly may have dire consequences. Rhetoric, policy, and public opinion is shaped by the way words make us feel, and it is imperative that they be used carefully.