

# The truth about doublespeak: Is it lying or just being persuasive?

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Doublespeak, or the use of euphemisms to sway opinion, lets leaders avoid the reputational costs of lying while still bringing people around to their way of thinking, a new study has found.

Researchers at the University of Waterloo found that the use of agreeable euphemistic terms biases people's evaluations of actions to be more favourable. For example, replacing a disagreeable term, "torture," with something more innocuous and semantically agreeable, like "enhanced interrogation."

"Like the much-studied phenomenon of ['fake news'](#), manipulative [language](#) can serve as a tool for misleading the public, doing so not with falsehoods but rather with the strategic use of euphemistic language," said Alexander Walker, lead author of the study and a Ph.D. candidate in cognitive psychology at Waterloo. "The avoidance of objectively false claims may provide the strategic user of language with plausible deniability of dishonesty, thus protecting them from the reputational cost associated with lying."

As part of a series of studies investigating the effectiveness, consequences and mechanisms of doublespeak in a psychological context, the researchers investigated whether the use of language characteristic of doublespeak can be used to influence peoples' evaluations of actions.

The researchers identified doublespeak as the strategic manipulation of language to influence the opinions of others by representing the truth in a manner that benefits one's self. To do this, the researchers assessed whether substituting an agreeable term—for example, "working at a meat-processing plant" in place of a semantically related disagreeable term like "working at a slaughterhouse"—has an impact on how a person's actions are interpreted.

The researchers' results confirmed that peoples' evaluations of an action can be biased in a predictable, self-serving way when an individual employs the strategic use of more or less agreeable terms when describing an action.

"Our study shows how language can be used strategically to shape peoples' opinions of events or actions," Walker said. "With a lower level of risk, individuals may be able to utilize linguistic manipulation, such as doublespeak, often without correction."

The study, "Controlling the Narrative: Euphemistic Language Affects Judgments of Actions while Avoiding Perceptions of Dishonesty," authored by Waterloo's Faculty of Arts researchers Walker, Jonathan Fugelsang, Martin Turpin, Ethan Meyers, Derek Koehler and Jennifer Stolz, appears in the journal *Cognition*.

**More information:** Alexander C. Walker et al. Controlling the narrative: Euphemistic language affects judgments of actions while avoiding perceptions of dishonesty, *Cognition* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.cognition.2021.104633](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2021.104633)

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