Reading Passage (265 words): Uses of Language

During certain circumstances, euphemisms, jargon, and inflated language may be used to avoid directly mentioning a painful reality, to create solidarity with a specialized group, and to make something more impressive than it actually is.

Euphemism is an inoffensive or positive word used to avoid a harsh, unpleasant, or distasteful reality. However, it can also be a tactful word or phrase which avoids directly mentioning a painful reality, or it can be an expression used out of concern for the feelings of someone else. For example, you express your condolences that someone has "passed away" because you do not want to say to a grieving person, "I'm sorry your father is dead." In this case, you are using a euphemism to avoid directly mentioning the painful reality of death.

Jargon is the specialized language of a trade, profession, or similar group, such as that used by doctors, lawyers, engineers, educators, or car mechanics. Jargon can serve as an important and useful function. Within a group, jargon functions as a kind of verbal shorthand allowing for group members to communicate clearly and quickly. Indeed, it is the mark of membership in the group to be able to use and understand the group's jargon.

Inflated language typically is designed to make the ordinary seem extraordinary, to make everyday things seem impressive, and to give an air of importance to people, situations, or things that would not normally be considered important. For instance, a car mechanic who refers to himself as an "automotive internist" is using a euphemism to make his job more important than it actually is.

Writing Prompt: How does the information in the lecture add to the information in the reading passage?

Reading Passage (393 words): Examples of Double Speak

Euphemisms, jargon, and inflated language can also be forms of doublespeak when they are used to deceive or mislead others. When I say the word doublespeak, I use it within the context of a type of language that pretends to communicate but really doesn't. It is language that makes the bad seem good, the negative appear positive. Doublespeak is language that avoids or shifts responsibility, language that is at variance with its real or purported meaning.

When a euphemism is used to mislead or deceive, it can become a form of doublespeak. For example, in 1984 the U.S. State Department announced that it would no longer use the word "killing" in its annual report on the status of human rights in countries around the world. Instead, it would use the phrase "unlawful or arbitrary deprivation of life," which the department claimed was more accurate. Its real purpose for using this phrase was to avoid discussing the embarrassing situation of government-sanctioned killings in countries that are supported by the United States.

Jargon, like the euphemism, can also be a form of doublespeak. Consider this: When a member of specialized group uses its jargon to communicate with a person outside the group and uses it knowing the nonmember does not understand such language, then it is a form of doublespeak. To illustrate, National Airlines, in referring to a plane crash that occurred on May 9, 1978, used the phrase "involuntary conversion of a 727" to refer to the incident. You see the airline company did not want to use the words "plane crash" in its annual report to its stock holders for fear it would bring down the price of its stock.

Finally, inflated language can be used to deceive. You may have trouble figuring out that when a company "initiates a career alternative enhancement program," it is really laying off 5,000 workers. Or, when a doctor says that "negative patient care outcome," it means the patient died. Consider when the owner of a nuclear power plant says to the general public there was "rapid oxidation" when he actually means there was a fire. In all of these instances, inflated language is used to prevent others from understanding what is actually being said.

These examples of doublespeak should make it clear that doublespeak is not the product of careless or sloppy thinking. Indeed, most doublespeak is carefully designed and constructed to appear to communicate when it actually doesn't. It is language designed to mislead.