

PREFACE

"*The limits of my language are the limits of my world.*" - Ludwig Wittgenstein

"*You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.*" - Inigo Montoya, the Princess Bride

During a session of the inaugural liberal-conservative dialogue course for undergraduates at the University of Illinois¹, it didn't take long for the comments to arise:

"With what the Pope - the Vicar of Christ - has taught about abortion and what the Bible says about murder, how can any of you think it's okay?"

Silence.

"If you all had read the research like I have, maybe you wouldn't be a climate change denier."

Silence.

This may be an understandable reaction for anyone, of course, when someone has made clear there's only *one* position that thoughtful, rational, good-hearted people can take (especially if that doesn't happen to be *your* position!) Even without intending it, we all at times can "weaponize" certain words and phrases in a way that effectively chills and paralyzes subsequent space for disagreement or conversation - making it clear that no other (thoughtful) interpretations are really possible, let alone open to analysis or examination.

The diverse contributors to this volume are united by our concern at the current capacity of Americans (on all sides of the political spectrum) to thoughtfully engage each other, with too many examples of people seemingly unable to engage in real conversation about disagreements. Although the barriers to such conversations are varied, one looms larger than the others: a growing sense that there is really *not much to be learned or gained* in conversing with 'those people' on the other side.

One especially convicted conservative student was asked by progressive classmates at the end of the class, "We've asked you a lot of questions about where you're coming from. Why haven't you asked us any questions?" A bit embarrassed by the confrontation, this student stammered, "Umm...I don't have any!"

Obviously there may be lots of reasons for this kind of a response, including a feeling of defensiveness, a conclusion that others' views are irrelevant or separate dynamics in the

¹ One of the lead editors, Jacob Hess, co-facilitated this course in its early years (see Hess, J. Z., Rynczak, D., Minarik, J. & Landrum-Brown, J. (2010). [Alternative settings for liberal-conservative exchange: Examining an undergraduate dialogue course](#). *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 20(2), 156-166).

conversation that might inhibit curiosity. We don't pretend to know or understand everything that might play a role in a given case.

And yet we wonder, what causes this kind of an absence of curiosity generally? What is killing wonder and sincere questions across the political spectrum? Are there ways to create or preserve an ability and space to question, and promote more open exploration throughout our system?

And what about you: Are you tired of realizing you really *don't* understand 'those other people' on the other side of the political fence? Are you ready to admit how little you really *know them*? Is it time to acknowledge that those people whose views you abhor may actually be sane and good hearted - rather than just bad or stupid or hateful or Satan incarnate?

We're writing this book because we believe it's time to recognize that our collective "not understanding" is a problem for all of us - one which may well underlie our American political stalemate, where various factions can find nothing better to do than simply try to destroy/eliminate/overpower the other.

We can do better than that. We *are* better than that!

Central to the American experiment is a belief that a diverse people can self-govern - making space for real, vociferous disagreement. It's in our blood - and our heritage.

And yet something else is also in our blood - a sense of threat and perceived danger if we let our defenses down. There is something about that fear, threat and the polarization itself that can help us feel secure - reassured by our own superiority - with only heathens or haters on the 'other side.'

Stepping away from this even a little - making space to hear out our political opposite - can feel crazy or ridiculous or dangerous. That comfort zone is pretty darn attractive. Who wouldn't prefer to avoid discomfort?

If you're ready to give up even temporarily smugness and self righteousness (that feel SOOOO good), and admit ignorance, narrowness and intolerance (icky, uncomfortable) - for the sake of [your town, your country, your kids, God, your soul] this book is for you!

Our hope has been to create a text that can help unsettle the encased, calcified mindsets that disallow and discourage both questioning and dialogue itself.

Red Blue Evolution

Obviously, students are not the only ones for whom "real conversation" across socio-political divides feels increasingly impossible. Many of us grew up with the idea that there are certain things we *ought* not bring up in polite company (and certainly not big religious or political questions that

might upset people). More and more, this conversational straitjacket is extending far beyond the dinner table: make sure *not to talk about that...* at least not with *them!*

Moreover, while this issue is hardly unique to the United States, it does have a uniquely American cast. In a statistical comparison of citizens from twelve countries, only 23% of Americans report having regular conversations with people who disagree with them politically - the least of any country surveyed.²

Reasons for conversational avoidance are diverse: fear of hurting feelings, dislike of “contention” or “confrontation” or “politics,” the view that such discussion is pointless, the range of 'better options' everywhere we look to distract ourselves (how can you beat WWE mud wrestling?). Others have concluded that they already know the answers: 'Why would you want to talk to someone who just *doesn't get it?*'

And so we hang out with the people who are *right* (read: *think like us*). We socialize with them, worship with them, read books by them, and receive awards from them. Increasingly, we are even deciding to live next to them.³

And so we begin to follow the fate of the bird species that Darwin found divided by a mountain range on the Galapagos Islands. Indeed, the combination of these isolating conditions over time appears to be leading to an evolution of divergent language and customs between socio-political communities in America. With each passing year, there is less shared understanding, a smaller collective story, and bigger gaps in what is meant by the “same” words.

Red Blue Language

In the United States, of course, we often assume "shared language" to be a given – at least among all those who speak English, right?

Well, yes and no. As political alienation grows, the *same words* are often used to support *very different*, even contradictory, usages and agendas. Over time, these "same" words come to have remarkably different meanings from one group to another group and across contexts.

Depending on the particular meaning given to a word, the practical effect on lives, choices and policies can be profound. Thomas Schwandt, the author of a text that partly inspired our own, writes: "We are language beings...we are not the ones in charge of language; language is in charge of us. How one makes sense of this characteristic of our being human matters a great deal."⁴ As AJ Heschel famously said, “Words create worlds.”

² Diana C. Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative Versus Participatory Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

³ Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008).

⁴ Thomas Schwandt, *Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry*, (2007, p. xxix).

And the meanings of the words we use are anything but self-evident. Bruce Shuman writes⁵, “‘what words mean,’ then, is a complicated and vexed subject”:

Words have to be interpreted - and most of us interpret what words mean through our own “private dictionaries.” If we therefore assume that our definition is *the* definition, we might be setting ourselves up for gaping disagreements and misunderstandings arising from the clashing meaning of certain words. The real skill here may be learning to hear what the other person intended to say according to *their* dictionary - not according to our own.

Given the multiplicity of meanings that currently exist for various socio-political terms, wouldn't it be nice to have a simple way to be able to juxtapose and translate across the various, disparate meanings?

Red Blue Translation

In this book, we explore various meanings of approximately 160 specific words in the larger U.S. political vocabulary (out of many hundreds more – e.g., over 1700 in Oxford's Concise Political Dictionary). We offer here a particular collection of especially contested terms and phrases that partially shape our understanding of American political landscape as we know it today.

Our interest here, then, is especially (and exclusively) focused on terms that evoke varying definitions across the political landscape. This includes "hot buttons" or "trigger" words (such as "racist" or "socialist"), "code" words (such as “marriage equality” and “same-sex attraction”) and other words used to let others know your "tribe" (such as "traditional" or "biblical" or "scientific"). Words of significance in the political dialogue community are also addressed – including “dialogue,” “deliberation,” and other less familiar words that we consider valuable in opening up a broader American conversation, including terms like "transpartisan," "neurodiversity," "tyranny of civility," "disagreement practice," etc.

The specific idea of a “Red Blue Dictionary” is not ours alone – having been raised several times over the years by various members of the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation.⁶ In selecting these words, political dictionaries were consulted as well as a diverse set of dialogue leaders well versed in various socio-political and philosophical traditions. We were careful to stay

⁵ NCDD listserv

⁶ Including the following precursors:

-By Steve Bhaerman in a conversation with Michael Ostrolenk who used the phrase "corporate state" – causing Steve to realize “that having a common language that unites awakening people on the left and right becomes helpful in finding common ground and avoiding unnecessary misunderstandings and miscommunications.”

-At a 2009 conference titled “Engaging the Other” including Joseph McCormick, Michael Ostrolenk, Max Pappas, Walt Roberts and Debilyn Molineaux. Max asked Joan, "I know what that word is - but I'm not sure what you mean by that word?" - and someone said, "we need a dictionary!" The ground is ripe and many people have same idea - since the need for it seems so obvious.

-And again by Amanda Roman during a 2012 strategizing session with Phil Neisser, Joan Blades and Jacob Hess on "Expanding Liberal-Conservative Dialogue in America." Many of these same voices are now featured as contributors in this volume.

almost exclusively focused on words reflecting a significant diversity of meaning across the political landscape – especially those where these differences seemed to matter a great deal in practice.

It goes without saying, perhaps, that each of these terms might hold many other meanings not covered here. Our aim is not to be universally comprehensive, and these definitions do not pretend to encapsulate all the possible meanings. Where we miss something important, we hope to learn of these omissions as we get feedback from readers. We very much see this as a living document where our collective understandings of the differences can be curated and updated over time.

Overall, our focus will be the most common meanings currently in usage - an aim that often takes us beyond the purely intellectual meaning of a term to capture its contrasting value and emotive quality (e.g., "Biblical" as positive or pejorative). Unlike other satirical attempts at political dictionaries,⁷ we do this with an explicit intention of presenting competing views in their best possible light - and with balanced, fair articulations.

Since we live and write out of an American context, these meanings will be most applicable to the United States. An attempt to broaden the meanings to include international senses would likely overcomplicate the picture and potentially lose some of the practicality for American readers. That being said, we have attempted to write this with a breadth that we hope can be useful and relevance for a broader, international audience.

Red Blue Aims

Promoting fairness. Although we strive for fairness in our articulations, we do not pretend to be unbiased or neutral. Indeed, both the terms selected for the *Red Blue Dictionary* and their definitions reflect the unique standpoints of editors and contributors. Rather than a liability, we see these standpoints as a crucial backdrop out of which we are able to write and talk across these differences. Indeed, it is out of the vast diversity of our collective positions that we aim to fashion descriptions that accurately capture the different meanings of a word.⁸

In this way, we attempt to “map” those different meanings in a way that would be recognizable to those who embrace them. Where hostility and animosity exist between different views of a word, we sidestep the pejorative in favor of focusing on sheer contrasts in meaning. When distortions of meaning have become commonplace, we try to point that out as objectively as possible.

Understanding nuance. Ultimately, once again, we hope to offer a mini-"map" of the different positions on the term. While in some cases we define a word with one generally accepted meaning, mostly we are highlighting distinct conceptual senses of the same terms - tied to the contrasting evaluations and interpretive frameworks of the opposing parties.

⁷ The Dictionary of American Political Bullshit 2014 by Stephen L. Goldstein

⁸ Alongside our diversity, our editorial and writing team having at least 300 years of combined dialogue/deliberation experience.

In doing so, we're clearly not looking for a consensus definition or even a reconciliation between views - simply to lay out the juxtaposition clearly and fairly. This kind of a "perspicuous contrast" is something often lacking in current American conversation -and something we hope might contribute to a more thoughtful discourse.

In other words, our hope is that each entry's 'word-map' opens up a little dialogical space inviting individuals and groups with different perspectives on a word to consider the nuance of others' views on the same. For this reason, our own measure of success as a team will be how well this text and its different entries resonate with a politically diverse audience.

This *Red Blue Dictionary* may be used in a variety of ways. Some may use it as a personal reference in navigating the political waters in the U.S. This can include preparing for a conversation by familiarizing ourselves with how someone else might use a word - or seeking the same clarification after reading or hearing something challenging. We are hopeful that the text may be useful in high school and college classes for similar reasons.

Wherever it is used, we hope our exploration opens up a conversation about words, rather than simply trying to establish "the definition" of a word. In this, we follow Thomas Schwandt's approach to comparing interpretations "in such a way that further exploration is stimulated and not foreclosed" - inviting continued examination of our political world and investigation of the various assumptions that foreground it. In this way, Schwandt adds, "we are conversation partners with other speakers and with texts, partners engaged in a joint search for meaning."⁹

Although historical background and etymology can be helpful, we tend to touch on it only lightly - preferring to focus our examination on the contrast in current usages of the word and how they vary across settings now, rather than how they varied over past time periods. Where relevant to understanding current meanings, the origin of words and their historical context will also be explored. Throughout, "Key References" are also provided for the different issues.

Helping us talk. To be sure, words can invoke different and profoundly powerful narratives. Words can be used aggressively and as power plays, sending a strong message that a particular view cannot be questioned.

Words can also divide us - separating us into tribalized groups and marginalizing other perspectives. Equally so, they can also overstate uniformity. Words can also convey 'we're better than you' – 'I'm progressive' or 'we are the moral majority.'

In this way, language often makes it possible for people to quickly determine if you are friend or foe, and then quickly arrive at a whole set of assumptions based on hearing/or watching the reaction to a few telling terms. While pro-life/pro-choice is the simplest example, there are many

⁹ Ibid (p. xxix).

others where the words you use for yourself and others paint the bright lines. A lot of code is built into these terms that the unsuspecting doesn't realize can trap and categorize us - telling a certain (negative) story about the speaker. This is seen in how some progressives twitch at the use of religious language or some conservatives at "transgender" or "multicultural" etc.

The solution to the challenge of "hot button" words, however, may not be the various word-policing attempts that insist people 'don't use this word or that' - an approach that too often invokes fear, sensitivity and defensiveness. In contrast, by bringing more awareness to the ways in which terms are being used, we hope to inspire a spirit of exploration and inquiry. Ideally, people would use the *Red Blue Dictionary* to ask questions like "What does this mean for you? What is the impact of that word for you? How can we use this term to better understand and communicate? If that term is difficult for you, what is a more helpful one? Synonyms, anyone?"

One lesson from this is that language just isn't misunderstood. It is loaded. And "conversation" itself can be a minefield. Rather than just throwing up our hands in the air, however - and switching on the TV again - what about considering some kind of a shared intention that invites people to name the provocative language and/or test assumptions about what the speaker means and who the speaker is? In other words, what if we got curious about each others' language? The text that follows is not just translation but encouraging curiosity and assumption-testing. In doing so, we're not relying on intellectual comparisons alone, but also inviting people to "disarm" their language and speak to be understood, nothing more, nothing less.

The purpose, then, of drawing more thoughtful attention to various meanings of words is not to walk on egg-shells and give people additional worry about "offending for a word"¹⁰ - but instead, providing vocabulary definitions that help translate between different communities.

At the end of certain entries, we often highlight real-world examples of dialogue taking place between proponents of various viewpoints on the term. Readers are invited to investigate these dialogues and use them as a model for their own efforts.

In this way, we hope our book acts as a "gateway drug" to the magical world of dialogue. At the very least, it may function as a primer to help make people feel empowered to start a conversation. Where and when these conversations are the hardest, perhaps the text may help prepare the ground (and the participants) for a more powerful and transformative experience.

By unsettling the easy assurance that we "know enough," we hope that this text will invite a socialization in the opposite direction of much of the surrounding media atmosphere - inviting a bit more humility. Rather than calcifying certainty, we hope to invite a greater openness to engage with more authenticity. At that point, we may come to see these same disagreements in a profoundly different way – not as reasons for fear or concern, but as rich opportunities for offering

¹⁰ Isaiah 29:21, Holy Bible, King James Version.

regard for various perspectives. As Parker Palmer writes, "How did we forget that our differences are among our most valuable assets?"¹¹

¹¹ Parker Palmer, *Healing the Heart of Democracy* (Jossey-Bass, 2011), 2.