

## **A Clash of Professional Cultures: The David Kelly Affair**

*Biljana Scott*

The distinctive characteristics of professional cultures become most apparent under the following conditions: first, when separate cultures come into contact with each other and attempt to translate across their differences; and second, when the members of one professional culture transgress the rules and mores of their community and are exposed for their mistakes.<sup>1</sup>

The Hutton inquiry into the death of Dr David Kelly, the senior British arms inspector in the UN inspection mission to Iraq who was found dead in an English wood in July 2003, offers revealing insights into the contrasting professional cultures of journalists, politicians and scientists. Not only does the Hutton inquiry reveal essential differences in the styles of discourse of these three cultures, it also reveals the errors of judgement on the part of the key players within each professional culture, namely the journalist, Andrew Gilligan, the political spin doctor, Alastair Campbell and the scientist, David Kelly. The Hutton inquiry therefore provides a uniquely well-documented and contemporary case study of both conditions mentioned above.

This paper focuses both on the language and on the transgressions associated with each of the three professional cultures under investigation. Included within the linguistic analysis are the terms “sexing up” and “weapons of mass destruction,” the inferences and implications made by Gilligan, and the various devices from modals to presupposition used to “strengthen the language” of the September 2002 dossier.<sup>2</sup> The discussion of transgressions focuses on the issue of truth, lies and good faith, not only as “basic cultural values” which guide personal and professional conduct, but also as emotive terms which, as will be shown, have the reprehensible effect of foreclosing debate.

### **Relevance to Diplomacy**

The relevance of this paper to the practice of diplomacy is three-fold. First, diplomacy provides the backdrop against which the Kelly affair unfolded. It was in an act of public diplomacy aimed at winning both national and international support for increasing the pressure on Iraq that the British government exaggerated the threat of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction in its September dossier through what came to be known as the “forty-five minute claim.” It is because of his misgivings about the misrepresentation of scientific evidence for the benefit of government policy that Dr David Kelly first approached BBC journalists.

Second, all three protagonists may be deemed, in retrospect, to have in varying degrees perpetrated the same fault, that of “careless talk,” reminiscent of WW2 British propaganda that cautioned, “Careless talk can cost lives,” known in the US as: “Loose lips sink ships.” In the case of the Kelly affair, it was loose language that resulted in the perceived attack on the integrity of the British Government and the national crisis that followed. The power of language to sway

---

<sup>1</sup> I follow Geert Hofstede’s definition of culture as the “collective programming of the mind distinguishing the members of one group or category of people from another,” where “group/category” can be a nation, region, profession, organisation, department, gender or generation. For further information see Geert Hofstede’s homepage at <http://spitswww.uvt.nl/web/iric/hofstede/page4.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> “Iraq’s Weapons of Mass Destruction – The Assessment of the British Government, 24 December 2002.” <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page271.asp>.

public opinion, and to make or break not only individuals but also governments, is clearly central to the concerns of diplomacy.

Finally, the various inquiries which followed from the Kelly affair raised the curtain on the workings of the BBC, the government and the intelligence services, creating the kind of clarity and accountability which enhance public confidence. Yet against these advantages, the ultimate deflection of the debate on the validity of the government's claims about - and attack on - Iraq, into an assertion of good faith, diverted attention onto the strength of the government's beliefs rather than the pertinence of its policies. The hard sell of basic values witnessed here is, I believe, characteristic of public diplomacy as it is emerging post 9/11.

## Language

Differences in discourse styles are popularly thought to offer an accessible indicator of distinctions between professional cultures. Thus, for instance, it has been claimed that journalistic language may be careless and sensational; political language manipulative and spin-laden; scientific language cautious and empirically driven. Reductive though such generalisations might be, they provide a frame of reference from which to start. The next few sections, therefore, look at evidence from the Kelly affair for such assertions. Because meaning is always context dependent, each section is followed by an explanation of the context in which the discourse elements under analysis appeared. The decision to look at the evidence through the lens of language will, it is hoped, provide a novel insight into a topic that has already received saturation coverage both through official inquiries and in the British press.

### *The Language of Journalists*

A meeting took place between Dr David Kelly, the UK's top scientific adviser on weapons of mass destruction, and Andrew Gilligan, the defence correspondent of the BBC's *Radio 4 Today* programme, on May 22, 2003. There is no accurate transcript of the exchange, due to Gilligan's failure to tape-record the interview and to his subsequent loss of the notes he took of it, a transgression of professional practice for which he was severely criticised by Lord Hutton and which contributed to his dismissal from the BBC. However, a reconstruction of the conversation can be found in Gilligan's *Mail on Sunday* article published three days after the *Today* programme was broadcast.<sup>3</sup> A similar reconstruction was also featured on the BBC's *Panorama* programme entitled "A Fight to the Death,"<sup>4</sup> and reads as follows:

GILLIGAN: So, back to the dossier. What happened to it? When we last met, you were saying it wasn't very exciting.

KELLY: Yes, that's right. Until the last week, it was just as I told you. It was transformed in the week before publication.

GILLIGAN: To make it sexier?

KELLY: Yes. To make it sexier.

GILLIGAN: What do you mean? Can you give me some examples?

---

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Gilligan, article published in *Mail on Sunday*; available online at [http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/bbc/bbc\\_1\\_0027to0028.pdf](http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/bbc/bbc_1_0027to0028.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> "A Fight to the Death" was broadcast on British television on January 21, 2004, a week before the publication of Lord Hutton's findings on January 28, 2004; transcripts available online at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/nol/shared/spl/hi/programmes/panorama/transcripts/afighttothedeath.txt>.

KELLY: The classic was the 45 minutes. The statement that WMD could be ready in 45 minutes was single source and most things in the dossier were double source.

GILLIGAN: How did this transformation happen?

KELLY: Campbell.

GILLIGAN: What, you know that Campbell made it up? They made it up?

KELLY: No, it was real information but it was unreliable and it was in the dossier against our wishes.

Gilligan broadcast the following news item on the *Today* programme, BBC Radio 4, on May 29, 2003, at 06.07 am:

What we've been told by one of the senior officials in charge of drawing up that dossier was that actually the government probably knew that the forty-five minute figure was wrong even before it decided to put it in. . . . Downing Street, our source says, ordered a week before publication, ordered it to be sexed up, to be made more exciting and ordered more facts to be, to be discovered.<sup>5</sup>

Since this short and seemingly innocuous broadcast acted as the trigger for the momentous debacle that followed, it is worth looking at the wording closely. We find that Gilligan makes a number of false attributions and inferences.

First, Dr David Kelly was not a senior official in charge of drawing up the Iraq dossier but an arms inspector attached as an official to the Ministry of Defence. Gilligan, in his own defence, claims to have offered Kelly two options on how he would like to be described: "One of the senior officials involved in drawing up the dossier" or "the senior official in charge of drawing up the dossier," both of which Kelly is supposed to have approved.<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, our knowledge of Kelly's actual words is uncertain and this underlying uncertainty underlies all of Gilligan's pronouncements about the interview.

Second, Kelly does not suggest that the government "probably knew that the forty-five minute figure was wrong," he merely claims that the intelligence source was uncorroborated. If the British government had indeed known the forty-five minute claim to be wrong and had inserted it into the dossier regardless, having made it up in order to achieve the desired public reaction, then the government would have been guilty of deceit. Since, as will be discussed below, truthfulness is a basic value which, when breached, provokes strong condemnation, Gilligan's charge is a very serious one indeed.

Third, Kelly does not say that it was Downing Street that had "ordered it to be sexed up." At most, if we can rely on the reconstruction, Kelly refers to an individual - Alastair Campbell - who was the director of communication and strategy at the time. However, it emerged in the Hutton inquiry that Kelly did not volunteer the name and only acceded when Gilligan suggested Campbell as one of the perpetrators of the "sexing up" exercise. In his evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee, Kelly denies having mentioned Campbell.<sup>7</sup> In a subsequent conversation with Susan Watts the day after Gilligan's broadcast, Kelly also backs off from accusing Campbell. It does, however, appear that he had pointed the finger at Campbell in an earlier conversation with Watts:

---

<sup>5</sup> For a full transcript, see [http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/bbc/bbc\\_1\\_0004to0017.pdf](http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/bbc/bbc_1_0004to0017.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Matt Wells, "The Story of the Story," *The Hutton Inquiry and its Impact* (London: Politico's Guardian Books, 2004), 38.

<sup>7</sup> Transcript of oral evidence given before the Foreign Affairs Committee by Dr David Kelly, available online at [http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/fac/fac\\_1\\_0060to0096.pdf](http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/fac/fac_1_0060to0096.pdf), 13-14.

WATTS: [on the 45-minute claim] So would it be accurate then, as you did in that earlier conversation, to say that it was Alastair Campbell himself who . . . ?

KELLY: No I can't. All I can say is the No. 10 press office. I've never met Alastair Campbell so I can't. But . . . I think Alastair Campbell is synonymous with the press office because he's responsible for it.<sup>8</sup>

It is worth noting here that Kelly equates Campbell with the Press Office rather than with the Blair government, which is what Gilligan's use of the metonym "Downing Street" would typically denote.<sup>9</sup> However, Gilligan is not far off the mark in his claim of Downing Street involvement. As was revealed during the Hutton inquiry, an unnamed government official (a member of Whitehall's Joint Intelligence Committee) sent an email to the secret services saying Downing Street wanted the dossier "to be as strong as possible within the bounds of available intelligence. . . . This is therefore a last! Call for any items of intelligence that agencies think can and should be included."<sup>10</sup>

The fourth dubious attribution Gilligan makes concerns the term "sexed up," which he later admitted was not used by Kelly. At best, Kelly repeated Gilligan's suggestion that information was added to the dossier in order to "make it sexier." Kelly dismissed Gilligan's version of their conversation out of hand when he said to Nick Rufford, a journalist friend who had come to warn him that his name was out in the public domain, "I talked to him about factual stuff. The rest is bullshit."<sup>11</sup> Many people feel that the term "sexed up" is indeed more congruent with a journalist's than a scientist's register and it is possible, therefore, that Gilligan was putting words into Kelly's mouth.

Finally, Gilligan is guilty of making a false inference concerning why the 45-minute claim did not appear in earlier drafts of the Iraq dossier. According to Gilligan, "the reason it hadn't been in the original draft . . . was that it only came from one source."<sup>12</sup> Gilligan based his inference on the following words, which he attributes to Kelly: "It was included in the dossier against our wishes, because it wasn't reliable. Most things in the dossier were double source, but that was single source, and we believed that the source was wrong."<sup>13</sup>

The single source is the reason Kelly was unhappy about the claim, especially as that source was unreliable, but it was not the reason for its omission from earlier drafts of the dossier. According to evidence that would later be given to the Foreign Affairs Committee, the 45-minute claim was not included because it was fresh intelligence.<sup>14</sup> Gilligan's mistaken inference, however, adds fuel to the sensational suggestions made in his broadcast, subsequently spread by Chinese whispers, that the government had knowingly planted wrong information in the dossier shortly before its publication in order to exaggerate the danger presented by Iraq and thereby to promote its own advocacy of war against Iraq. "In this respect a claim with quite serious

---

<sup>8</sup> For a full transcript, see [http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/sjw/sjw\\_1\\_0037to0043.pdf](http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/sjw/sjw_1_0037to0043.pdf), 4.

<sup>9</sup> The use of "Downing Street" to denote different referents is not elaborated in this paper, but is an interesting linguistic phenomenon that would merit further examination elsewhere.

<sup>10</sup> Ewen MacAskill, "The Dossier," *The Hutton Inquiry and its Impact* (London: Politico's Guardian Books, 2004) 18.

<sup>11</sup> See "A Fight to the Death,"

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/nol/shared/spl/hi/programmes/panorama/transcripts/afighttothedeath.txt>.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Gilligan, *Mail on Sunday* article, available at [http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/fac/fac\\_1\\_0027to0029.pdf](http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/fac/fac_1_0027to0029.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> See "Lines to Take" on 45-minutes memo: [http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/cab/cab\\_4\\_0014.pdf](http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/cab/cab_4_0014.pdf).

implications appears to rest on no authority at all other than a speculative and incorrect deduction made by the journalist.”<sup>15</sup>

The immediate context of Gilligan’s broadcast sheds some light on the tone he adopted for it. It took place in the context of a “two-way” interview, in which a reporter is interviewed by a news presenter and answers a number of questions on his or her story. This format has several distinctive attributes and consequences. One is that the news thus delivered is unscripted and may, therefore, lack rigor. Another is that it offers journalists an invitation to make the news, not to report it. This is particularly relevant in the context of so-called “frenzy journalism” in which, ever since the Watergate scoop, journalists see themselves as capable of bringing down a president or prime minister through investigative reporting.<sup>16</sup> A third characteristic of the two-way is that it runs the risk of “collusive auction,”<sup>17</sup> where unreliable claims outbid each other. This is illustrated in the introduction the anchor newsman John Humphrys gave Gilligan on the *Today* programme:

Now our defence correspondent Andrew Gilligan has found evidence that the government’s dossier on Iraq that was produced last September was cobbled together at the last minute with some unconfirmed material that had not been approved by the security services.<sup>18</sup>

Humphrys is here guilty of sensationalising the facts: although the “last minute” refers to the last week before the dossier’s publication and the “unconfirmed material” refers to the single source, there is, nevertheless, no justification for Humphrys’ claim that the material “had not been approved by the security services.” Kelly may have objected to it while speaking to Gilligan, but this is a far cry from the claim that it was not approved of by the security services, which Kelly anyway did not represent.

Humphrys’ claim that the dossier was “cobbled together” is not random, however, and alludes to the notorious “dodgy dossier,” a government dossier on Iraq published in February 2003, later revealed to have passed off plagiarised material from an outdated doctoral thesis as recent intelligence. It was also notorious for obvious instances of spin. An example involves the rewording of phrases such as: Iraqi intelligence was “aiding opposition groups in hostile regimes” to Iraqi intelligence was “supporting terrorist groups in hostile regimes.” The *Today* programme broadcast, therefore, has to be understood in the context of the dodgy dossier that epitomises a previous government exercise in using a supposedly factual document for the purpose of hack-handed advocacy.

Furthermore, Gilligan’s initial *Today* programme broadcast is best understood in the context of other statements he made on the same subject at the time. He made a total of nineteen radio broadcasts on May 29, mostly more subdued in tone. For instance in his 07:32 Radio 4 news broadcast he modulates his original charge that Downing Street had “ordered” the dossier to be sexed up into “[my source] told me the dossier was transformed at the behest of Downing Street.”<sup>19</sup> Similarly, he qualifies his suggestion of deception by allowing for the possibility of an

---

<sup>15</sup> Richard Webster, “The Death of a Scientist,” <http://www.richardwebster.net/deathofascientist.html>.

<sup>16</sup> David Aaronovitch, “The End of the Poisoned Embrace,” *The Hutton Inquiry and its Impact* (London: Politico’s Guardian Books, 2004), 339.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Radio 4 *Today* Programme, 29 May 2003, transcript available online at [http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/bbc/bbc\\_1\\_0004to0017.pdf](http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/bbc/bbc_1_0004to0017.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

error made in good faith, and refers to the 45-minute claim as “questionable” rather than “wrong:”

It could have been an honest mistake, but what I have been told is that the government knew that the claim was questionable, even before the war, even before they wrote it in their dossier.<sup>20</sup>

In his *Mail on Sunday* article published on June 1, Gilligan not only has more space to elaborate on his story, but he also has the chance to respond to the impact of his initial broadcast. Thus, we find him setting the record straight when he says:

The Prime Minister and his staff have spent the past few days denying claims that no one has ever actually made – that material in the dossier was invented; that it came from nonintelligence sources, and so on.<sup>21</sup>

In the next breath, however, he stokes the fire by suggesting that in failing to deny other accusations, such as the last minute rewriting of the dossier, the late insertion of the 45-minute claim, and a meeting between Jack Straw and Colin Powell concerning the fragility of intelligence, the government is indeed guilty of something. Implied throughout the article, but never overtly stated, is the charge that the government is guilty, if not of overt falsehood, then of spin so distorting as to be akin to deception.

Gilligan makes the implication of falsehood by means of the following devices: first by framing the context of the September dossier and previous government publications in such a way as to foreground the disaffection of the intelligence services with the government’s spin-driven approach. Illustrative quotes include: “We take pride in our independence . . . and we are unhappy to see our work being quoted in public” (cited as a quote from an official of the Joint Intelligence Committee); “The final version [of the January dossier] was not shown to the Joint Intelligence Committee. They were furious about that too,” and “The spooks may have been too ready to give way to the spinners.”<sup>22</sup>

Second, Gilligan uses simile and analogy with America in order to condemn Britain. This is illustrated by his use of the following quote from retired American spies condemning government spin in the Bush administration: “There is one unpardonable sin: Cooking intelligence to the recipe of high policy. There is ample evidence that this has been done in Iraq.”<sup>23</sup> In the same vein, Gilligan quotes a member of the Pentagon’s Defence Intelligence Agency as saying: “The Americans were manipulated.” Readers of the *Mail on Sunday* are invited to infer that the British public has likewise been manipulated.

Third, Gilligan accuses the British government not only of over-ruling intelligence but also of condescending to the British public, thus making an emotional appeal to the reader’s sense of self-respect:

The language of intelligence is inconclusive. The language of spin admits much less doubt. The Government thinks we need an easy headline – Saddam’s nuclear bomb, Saddam’s 45-minute warning. I’m not sure we’re that stupid.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew Gilligan, article published in *Mail on Sunday*; available online at [http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/bbc/bbc\\_1\\_0027to0028.pdf](http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/bbc/bbc_1_0027to0028.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

As it turns out, this sentence proved to be very prescient. Amendments to the dossier requested by Campbell and his colleagues did indeed call for a strengthening of the language in order to eliminate uncertainty, and the 45-minute claim, as it emerged during the Hutton inquiry, was indeed aimed at securing sensationalist and alarmist headlines.

Finally, one of Gilligan's most forceful implications of deceit comes in the rhetorical flourish with which he concludes his article:

Some say none of this is important. All that matters is that a tyrant was toppled. . . . However, the dossier saga touches on an even more important goal than the freeing of oppressed foreign peoples. That is, that your words should be credible, and your own people should be told the truth.<sup>25</sup>

Emotive though this appeal to truth is, and incendiary though Gilligan's article and broadcasts were in their implied accusations, it is difficult to find a case here for Campbell's subsequent accusation that Gilligan's BBC story "is a lie, it was a lie, it is a lie that is continually repeated and until we get an apology for it I will keep making sure that parliament, people like yourselves and the public know that it was a lie."<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps the final piece of context that needs to be mentioned in order to make sense of the passion of Campbell's accusations is the *Mail on Sunday's* editorial input into Gilligan's story. The photograph showed an unflattering image of Campbell and the headline, supposedly a quote from Gilligan, reads sensationally: "I asked my intelligence source why Blair misled us all over Saddam's weapons. His reply? One word . . . CAMPBELL." As Matt Wells explains, "That one headline, more than anything else, set the course for the firestorm that followed."<sup>27</sup>

Can we claim based on Gilligan's initial broadcast that his language was sensationalist? It is significant that although Gilligan states the fragility of available evidence, he only *implies* the presence of deceit. Even in his initial and most forcefully stated broadcast, he hedges his accusation with the qualifying adverb "probably" when he claims the government probably knew the 45-minute claim to be wrong. The headline to his article was indeed sensationalist, but this was not of Gilligan's or the BBC's doing.

On the other hand, Gilligan certainly is guilty of not having kept an accurate record of his interview with Kelly and of having made some false attributions and mistaken inferences. Lord Hutton's criticism of "loose language" is, therefore, justified, as is his editor's criticism that "he painted in primary colours." But Campbell's sustained haranguing of the BBC in order to secure an apology, his public appearances – including a dramatic unscheduled appearance on the BBC's Channel 4 evening news – in which he accuses Gilligan of lying and demands a retraction from him, not to mention his own very primary colour private expressions of retaliation,<sup>28</sup> hardly seem warranted by the *Today* programme broadcast. This is all the more so given that Gilligan's interpretation of Kelly's words has largely been borne out – his inferences were, it turns out, sound. As Jeremy Dear, the General Secretary of the National Union of Journalists argued, the "essential truth" of Gilligan's report could and should be defended.<sup>29</sup> There must be something more, therefore, to Campbell's rage than the words "the government probably knew that the

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> "Campbell to the Foreign Affairs Committee," 25 June, cited in *The Hutton Inquiry and its Impact*, 51-2.

<sup>27</sup> Wells, "The Story of the Story," *The Hutton Inquiry and its Impact*, 41.

<sup>28</sup> Diary of Alastair Campbell, 4 July 2003, available online at [http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/cab/cab\\_39\\_0001to0002.pdf](http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/cab/cab_39_0001to0002.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> Cited in Aaronovitch, "The End of the Poisoned Embrace," *The Hutton Inquiry and its Impact*, 334.

forty-five minutes claim was wrong” or that “Downing Street . . . ordered it to be sexed up.” What this might be is discussed below.

### *The Language of Politicians*

One of the most interesting dimensions of the Hutton inquiry was the wealth of normally confidential material which Lord Hutton ordered to be made public, from official minutes to informal office emails and private diary entries. Thanks to this, we have an exceptionally comprehensive coverage of available written material. It is in the language of the Iraq dossier that we find some of the strongest evidence of political spin. As emerged during the Hutton inquiry, Campbell had drawn up a sixteen-point memo of recommendations for “strengthening” the language of the dossier.<sup>30</sup> The resulting changes to the dossier illustrate both sins of commission and of omission.

Foremost among the sins of commission is the 45-minute claim, made four times in the dossier. The version in the preface, written by Tony Blair, reads: Saddam “has existing and active military plans for the use of chemical and biological weapons, which could be activated within 45 minutes.”<sup>31</sup> Of note here is the certainty with which the claim is made, despite the background uncertainty concerning the reliability of the source and its compatibility with existing intelligence material. Also of note is the ambiguity contained in the 45-minute claim. As the witness, Mr A, testified:

All those of us without access to that intelligence immediately asked the question: well, what does the 45 minutes refer to? Are you referring to a technical process? Are you referring to a commander control process? Moreover, if your assessment causes you immediately to ask questions, then we felt that it was not perhaps a statement that ought to be included.<sup>32</sup>

John Scarlett (Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee) told the inquiry that the 45-minute claim was meant to refer only to short-range battlefield weapons such as mortars, and not to long-range missiles able to strike at British bases in Cyprus, as the dossier implied.<sup>33</sup> When Geoff Hoon, the Defence Secretary, was asked why he had not put the record straight following sensationalist headlines on the imminence of attacks against Britain and British bases, he disingenuously replied that he found the task of trying to correct what appeared in the media time-consuming and frustrating.<sup>34</sup> However, as Richard Norton-Taylor suggests in his introduction to *The Hutton Inquiry and its Impact*, the insertion of the claim as well as its inherent ambiguity amount to an exercise in spin: “the evidence is that Downing Street was only too delighted at headlines in the press at the time warning of a 45-minute threat to Britain, not British troops invading Iraq.”<sup>35</sup>

A further sin of commission involves the use of modal auxiliaries. Modality is a cover term for a range of linguistic devices ranging from auxiliaries to adverbs that allow speakers to express varying degrees of commitment to, or belief in, a proposition. Thus the question of

---

<sup>30</sup> For the memo in full, see [http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/cab/cab\\_11\\_0066to0068.pdf](http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/cab/cab_11_0066to0068.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page271.asp>.

<sup>32</sup> Cited in MacAskill, “The Dossier,” *The Hutton Inquiry and its Impact*, 24.

<sup>33</sup> The Hutton Inquiry, Hearing Transcripts, available online at <http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/transcripts/hearing-trans42.htm>, 139.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 81-82.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Norton-Taylor, “Introduction,” *The Hutton Inquiry and its Impact*, 5.

whether Iraq *can, could, might* or *would* deploy nuclear weapons, depends on the degree of certainty of the speaker and to his/her commitment to the factuality of the statement. In the words of one linguist, modality refers to “the area of meaning that lies between yes and no.”<sup>36</sup> The study of modality falls under the heading of *realis* and *irrealis* in linguistics, or “possible world semantics,”<sup>37</sup> and it is precisely this link with hypothetical worlds which makes modality so central to political rhetoric.

Campbell reveals himself to have a keen awareness of the shadowland “between yes and no.” In his sixteen-point memo on strengthening the language of the dossier, no less than four recommendations concern modal auxiliaries, and each berates the fact that those used “are weak” or “read very weakly.”<sup>38</sup> By way of illustration, recommendation 10 reads: “On page 17 . . . ‘may’ is weaker than in the summary” (this refers to the draft sentence, “The Iraqi military may be able to deploy chemical or biological weapons within forty five minutes of an order to do so.”). Similarly, recommendation 11 reads: “On page 19, top line, again ‘could’ is weak ‘capable of being used’ is better” (referring to: “Other dual-use facilities, which could be used to support the production of chemical agent . . . have been rebuilt. . .”).<sup>39</sup> Other changes involving modals include the alteration of “Iraq could deploy” or “could be ready” (about the deployment of WMDs in 45 minutes) to read that these “are deployable.”<sup>40</sup> In each of these cases, Campbell increases the commitment to the factuality of the claims being made in the dossier. The world he depicts is more than merely possible – it becomes actual every time he replaces a modal such as “may” or “could” with a present passive such as “are deployable” or “are capable of being used.”

Although Campbell maintained that rather than changing the substance of the dossier, he merely made some presentational recommendations, as any linguist can testify, style and content are not independent of each other and a change in modal is not merely a presentational concern, but a semantic one. This was also the conclusion of Brian Jones (a civil servant working in counter-proliferation and defence intelligence) when he “made the crucial point that when it comes to intelligence assessments, *wording is substance*” (italics mine).<sup>41</sup>

Further revisions towards greater certainty were introduced by Campbell and his team, such as the change from “intelligence indicates” to “intelligence shows;” the inclusion of expressions such as “intelligence has established beyond doubt” and of presuppositions such as “We must ensure that he does not get to use the weapons *he has*”<sup>42</sup> (italics mine). Given the uncertainty of intelligence findings at the time, and the failure to discover any weapons of mass destruction since then, there was no justification for such confidence and this choice of language must be attributed to the rhetoric of persuasion.

Another instance of spin is to be found in the following changes in wording. The earlier draft, which was entitled “Iraq’s Programme for Weapons of Mass Destruction,” contained the entry “Saddam is prepared to use chemical and biological weapons if he believes his regime is under threat.” In the final draft, the title changed to “Iraq’s Weapons of Mass Destruction,” a

---

<sup>36</sup> Halliday, *Introduction to Functional Grammar* (London: Arnold, 1994).

<sup>37</sup> See the works of David Lewis.

<sup>38</sup> Campbell’s drafting points, available online at [http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/cab/cab\\_11\\_0066to0068.pdf](http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/cab/cab_11_0066to0068.pdf), points 2, 9, 10, 11.

<sup>39</sup> The draft Campbell refers to can be found at [http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/dos/dos\\_2\\_0058to0106.pdf](http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/dos/dos_2_0058to0106.pdf).

<sup>40</sup> Cited in MacAskill, “The Dossier,” *The Hutton Inquiry and its Impact*, 22.

<sup>41</sup> Jonathan Freedland, “Pulling Back the Veil,” *The Hutton Inquiry and its Impact*, 356.

<sup>42</sup> “Iraq’s Weapons of Mass Destruction – The Assessment of the British Government,” 24 December 2002, <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page271.asp>.

phrase which, unlike the first, presupposes the existence of WMDs, and the equivalent entry reads: "Saddam is willing to use chemical and biological weapons, including against his own Shia population." The conspicuous shift brought about by this rewording from a defensive to an offensive stance on the part of Saddam makes a direct appeal to our fear of an unprovoked attack. The reference to Halabja, an incident which took place some twenty years ago, further reinforces this fear, since it shows Saddam not only capable and willing to use such weapons, but also guilty of having already done so.

Just as the final draft of the dossier included unwarranted expressions of certainty, it also excluded earlier qualifications and uncertainties to achieve the same end. One of the most conspicuous of these sins of omission is the deletion of the following line from Blair's preface: "The case I make is not that Saddam could launch a nuclear attack on London or another part of the UK (he could not)." Further evidence emerged during the inquiry when this evidently unheeded email from Jonathan Powell, No. 10 Chief of Staff, dated September 17, 2002 was made public: "you need to make it clear Saddam could not attack us at the moment. The thesis is he would be a threat to the UK in the future if we do not check him."<sup>43</sup>

Perhaps even a more glaring sin of omission was the failure in the dossier, and in subsequent parliamentary debates, to articulate the range of weapons to which the 45-minute claim actually referred: short range battlefield weapons or long range ballistic missiles. Claims by the Prime Minister and by the Secretary for Defence, Geoff Hoon, that they had not thought to elucidate these facts appear as irresponsible as they are incredible. They were greeted by calls from the opposition for their resignation for "failing to ask basic questions" before going to war.<sup>44</sup> It is noteworthy that Blair's and Hoon's supposed ignorance concerning the weapons to which the 45-minute claim referred stand in stark contrast to the appraisal of Iraq's WMD given by Robin Cook, former leader of the House of Commons, in an article on why he felt compelled to resign on the eve of going to war:

Iraq probably has no weapons of mass destruction in the commonly understood sense of that term - namely, a credible device capable of being delivered against strategic city targets. It probably does still have biological toxins and battlefield chemical munitions. But it has had them since the 1980s when the US sold Saddam the anthrax agents and the then British government built his chemical and munitions factories.<sup>45</sup>

Lord Butler criticised the confusion arising from the dossier's use of the term "Weapons of Mass Destruction"<sup>46</sup> and criticised the form in which the 45-minute claim appears in the dossier.<sup>47</sup> He also considered it a "serious weakness that the JIC's warnings on the limitations of the intelligence were not made sufficiently clear in the Dossier."<sup>48</sup> His criticisms notwithstanding, it is interesting to note the linguistic subterfuge which Lord Butler himself practices in order not to

---

<sup>43</sup> E-mail from Jonathan Powell, 17 September 2002, available online at [http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/cab/cab\\_11\\_0053.pdf](http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/cab/cab_11_0053.pdf).

<sup>44</sup> "Howard Calls for Blair to Resign," *BBC News*, 5 February 2004, available online at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/3460771.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/3460771.stm).

<sup>45</sup> Robin Cook, "Why I Had to Leave the Cabinet," *The Guardian*, 18 March 2003, available online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,3604,916318,00.html>.

<sup>46</sup> See paragraph 12 of Lord Butler's opening statement at the press conference, available online at <http://www.butlerreview.org.uk/news/launchstatement.pdf>.

<sup>47</sup> See paragraph 511 of the report, <http://www.butlerreview.org.uk/report/index.asp>.

<sup>48</sup> See paragraph 24 Lord Butler's opening statement at the press conference, <http://www.butlerreview.org.uk/news/launchstatement.pdf>.

assign blame with regard to why the “language in the dossier as used by the Prime Minister, may have left readers with the impression that there was fuller and firmer intelligence than was the case.”<sup>49</sup> He refers to a process of translation (as opposed to, for instance, “alteration” or “inclusion”) and uses the impersonal passive of the verb “to lose,” which connotes an unfortunate but unintentional incident rather than an agentive act, when he says: “In *translating* material to the dossier, warnings in the JIC assessment *were lost*” (italics mine).<sup>50</sup>

These examples of politically driven changes to the language of the dossier are best understood in the context of the Blair administration’s evident desire to go to war against Iraq. This objective helps to explain the exceptional circumstances in which the Iraq dossier was written, with the Prime Minister’s Director of Communications and Strategy and some of his team of press officers making recommendations on “presentational” matters while intelligence officers discussed and wrote drafts of a dossier “owned” by the Joint Intelligence Committee. Such a set up can only be explained as a means of inserting spin under the cover of intelligence – advocacy in the guise of a factual report – and has been condemned in the Butler report.<sup>51</sup>

The same determination to go to war explains the need for spin in the first place. Because it would have been unpolitic to admit to wanting war without first finding a legal pretext for it, such as Iraqi non-compliance to United Nations Security Council resolutions, yet because there was no ready consensus within the UN over non-compliance and the need for war, it was important to Blair’s purpose that public and parliamentary opinion, which was largely anti-war, be swung round. A clear and current threat from Saddam was the catalyst chosen to bring this change about. Revealingly, Blair’s Chief of Staff Jonathan Powell e-mailed Alastair Campbell asking, “Alastair: What will be the headline in the Evening Standard on the day of publication. What do we want it to be?” True to expectation – and it would seem design – the tabloid press reaction to the Iraq dossier was indeed sensationalist, and included the following headlines: “45 Minutes From Attack” (*Evening Standard*); “45 Minutes From a Chemical War” (*The Star*); “Saddam Can Strike in 45 Minutes” (*Express*); “HE’S GOT ’EM . . . LETS GET HIM” (*The SUN*); “Brits 45 Minutes From Doom . . . British servicemen and tourists in Cyprus could be annihilated by germ warfare missiles launched by Iraq, it was revealed yesterday” (*The SUN*). As noted, the government made no attempt to correct the misapprehensions behind these headlines.

Finally, the following two quotes provide further background context in support of the policy-promoting rather than intelligence-sharing aims of the dossier. The first comes from an email from Danny Pruce (a Foreign Office diplomat seconded to Downing Street Press Department) to a Foreign Office colleague: “much of the evidence is circumstantial so we need to convince our readers that the cumulation of these facts demonstrates an intent on Saddam’s part.”<sup>52</sup> Revealingly, the email carries on to read, “the more they can be led to this conclusion themselves rather than have to accept judgements from us, the better,” an injunction which justifies the close attention paid to modals and the possible worlds they create. The second quote comes from Campbell’s personal diary, read as evidence to Lord Hutton: “The dossier had to be ‘revelatory,’ we needed to show that it was new and informative, and part of a bigger case.”<sup>53</sup> In

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> For a satirical review of Lord Butler’s use of language, see Matthew Norman “Like Jeeves, this Butler’s First Language is Euphemism,” *The Guardian*, 17 July 2004, available online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/butler/story/0,14750,1263454,00.html>.

<sup>51</sup> See paragraph 23 of the report, <http://www.butlerreview.org.uk/report/index.asp>.

<sup>52</sup> Cited in MacAskill, “The Dossier,” *The Hutton Inquiry and its Impact*, 20.

<sup>53</sup> Campbell’s diary entry, 5 September 2002.

other words, since the old story about Saddam was not good enough to serve the Government's purpose, a *new*, more eye-catching, more convincing case had to be made.

Can we claim because of the evidence surveyed here that Campbell's input into the dossier was spin-laden? Was Gilligan right in accusing him of having sexed it up? What does the term to "sex up" actually mean? Lord Hutton described it as "a slang word the meaning of which lacks clarity" because of an inherent ambiguity:

It could mean that the dossier was embellished with items of intelligence known or believed to be false. Or, it could mean that while intelligence contained in the dossier was believed to be true and reliable - it was drafted in such a way as to make the case against Saddam Hussein as strong as possible.<sup>54</sup>

He went on to add, "If the term is used in the latter sense . . . it could be said the government 'sexed up' the dossier . . . but this was not the meaning of Mr Gilligan's broadcast," he concluded.<sup>55</sup> Opinions differ concerning this judgement.<sup>56</sup>

It is indeed unfortunate that the central accusation against the British government should have been expressed by means of a new coinage that had not yet acquired a consensual definition. Yet, it is precisely because "sexing up" was still open to interpretation that it proved so provocative. Although Lord Hutton determined that the term is ambiguous, my own assessment is that "to sex up," in its basic sense, means to embellish and render more eye-catching, glamorous and appealing - more "sexy" in short. Although the phrasal verb "to sex up" is indeed new,<sup>57</sup> it is not difficult to understand by analogy with equivalent phrasal verb constructions: to "beef up" means to make more beefy; to "dress up" means to make more dressy; therefore to "sex up" means to make more sexy. In the context of sexing up one's looks, we would readily envisage scope for art, subterfuge, and even deceit - these would not be mutually exclusive meanings, but are integral to the definition of the term. However, the term as used by Gilligan was applied *metaphorically* in the context of a government dossier. In this context, the defining elements of art, subterfuge and deceit are retained and applied not to a human body but to a body of information. Again, the term is not ambiguous in the sense of having two mutually exclusive meanings - if anything, it is polysemous in that it includes all these meanings.

The problem arises, I believe, not at a linguistic but at a socio-cultural level, where a categorical distinction is made between embellishment, spin, language-strengthening and other kindred activities, all of which are considered par for the course, and - in the other corner - deceit, which is considered an unpardonable crime. Therefore, although one may quibble with the term "to sex up" and may even accuse Gilligan as John Williams, the Foreign Office Press Secretary did, of having done "great violence to the English language,"<sup>58</sup> such terminological disputes distract from the issue at hand, which is to evaluate the evidence concerning the presence of either deceit and/or spin in the language of the September dossier. Such an exercise

---

<sup>54</sup> Hutton Report, available online at <http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Politics/documents/2004/01/28/huttonreport.pdf>, Chapter 12, 320: viii.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> See, for instance, Ewen MacAskill and Richard Norton-Taylor, "Ten Ways to Sex up a Dossier," *The Guardian*, 27 September 2003; available online at <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/kelly/story/0,13747,1050931,00.html>.

<sup>57</sup> For a definition and origin, see [http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Sexed\\_up](http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Sexed_up).

<sup>58</sup> "John Williams," *The Guardian*, 22 August 2003, available online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/hutton/keyplayers/story/0,13842,1027777,00.html>.

leads us to another, much more intractable semantic problem: whether it is possible to draw a clear line between spin and deceit.

### *The Language of Scientists*

The publicly broadcast images of David Kelly being interrogated by the Foreign Affairs Committee just a few days before he committed suicide epitomise the clash of professional cultures and discourse styles represented by an aggressive and point-scoring politician, on the one hand, and a mild mannered weapons expert inclined to hedge all his answers, on the other. The acute discomfort Kelly was clearly suffering on that occasion suggests that his language did not so much reflect the language of a scientist as it betrayed the stress of a man being “put through the wringer” as he himself described the experience.<sup>59</sup> Although I do not use it as the basis for my linguistic analysis, the discourse features discussed below are amply evident in the transcript of Kelly’s responses to the FAC.<sup>60</sup>

Accordingly, I draw my evidence of Kelly’s discourse style from Kelly’s tape-recorded telephone interview the day after Gilligan’s story broke with Susan Watts, the BBC *Newsnight* science editor.<sup>61</sup> Two attributes emerge: his tendency to qualify the degree of certainty associated with any claim to knowledge, whether his or others’; and his recognition of the existence of differing points of view and the impact that differences in perspective might have on the meaning or significance of a proposition. Both of these attributes might be considered typical of scientific caution.

An example of a qualification concerning other people’s beliefs is: “I mean they wouldn’t think it was me, I don’t think. Maybe they would, maybe they wouldn’t, I don’t know.” An example of a qualification concerning his own professional status and access to information is: “You have to remember I’m not part of the intelligence community – I’m a user of intelligence. . . . So some of it I really can’t comment because I don’t know whether it’s single source or not.” And an example of a qualification with regard to his influence, in response to the question, “but it was against your advice that they should publish it?” is: “I wouldn’t go so strongly as to say that particular bit . . . no I can’t say it was against MY advice. I was uneasy with it.”<sup>62</sup> Further examples abound in which Kelly either declines to comment for lack of sufficient information, or declines to confirm suggestions as anything more than “a possibility.”

Examples of Kelly’s respect for differences in perspective include, in response to Watt’s mentioning No 10’s furious denials that it had inserted the 45-minute claim: “well, I think it’s a matter of perception isn’t it. I think people will perceive things and they’ll be, how shall I put it, they’ll see from their own standpoint and they may not even appreciate quite what they were doing.” Similarly, towards the end of the interview when Watts suggests she’ll ring him again if there proves to be “a surprise” in the forthcoming Blix document, “but you’re not expecting that, are you?” Kelly answers “I’m not, but you think differently to me so you might find there’s a surprise there, I don’t know.”<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> Kelly to Nick Rutherford, cited in “Fight to the Death,” BBC Panorama, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/shared/spl/hi/programmes/panorama/transcripts/afighttothedeath.txt>.

<sup>60</sup> Transcript of oral evidence given before the Foreign Affairs Committee by Dr David Kelly, [http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/fac/fac\\_1\\_0060to0096.pdf](http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/fac/fac_1_0060to0096.pdf).

<sup>61</sup> Susan Watts and Kelly telephone transcript, [http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/sjw/sjw\\_1\\_0037to0043.pdf](http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/sjw/sjw_1_0037to0043.pdf).

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

Despite these expressions of caution, Kelly's undoing came when he lied to Parliament. Asked by the MP Ottaway to respond to what proved to be a transcript of his conversation with Watts, Kelly answered: "I find it very difficult. It does not sound like my expression of words. It does not sound like a quote from me." Ottaway then asked: "You deny that those are your words?" To which Kelly uttered the one damning word: "Yes."<sup>64</sup>

It is no doubt significant in relation to this discussion of different professional cultures, that of all the people in this affair revealed to have dabbled in untruths, whether we call their activities lies or not, Kelly is the only one who had any remorse about it. So much so that it must have contributed to his decision to commit suicide.

The immediate context in which Kelly lied was one of extreme duress, not only because of the public humiliation he was subjected to, but also because of the tightrope act he had been asked to perform, in which he was to falsify the BBC's reporting in order that Gilligan might be discredited, but not to undermine the Iraq dossier, the integrity of which the government was anxious to preserve.<sup>65</sup> The FAC had accordingly been instructed not to draw him out on his views regarding the intelligence contained in the dossier. Would Kelly have willingly embarrassed the government? The following words from Kelly to Watts reflect the fair mindedness and integrity of a professional who, like his colleagues Hans Blix, David Kay and Brian Jones, remained unconvinced by political interpretations of empirical evidence concerning WMDs:

We're not sure about that [the 45-minute claim], or in fact they [intelligence] were happy with it being in but not expressed the way it was, because, you know, the word-smithing is actually quite important, and the intelligence community are a pretty cautious lot on the whole but once you get people putting it/presenting it for public consumption then of course they use different words. I don't think they're wilfully dishonest. I think they just think that that's the way the public will appreciate it best.<sup>66</sup>

In concluding this analysis of discourse styles, the empirical evidence would seem to support the claim that journalistic language may on occasion be sensationalist, that political language tends to be spin-laden and scientific language factual. However, one would be justified in asking what the value of such generalisation might be. Language is not synonymous with culture, nor is it even a reliable indicator of cultural differences since, as we know, the same language can be spoken by different cultures, different languages can be spoken by similar cultures, and a given population sharing a common culture may well be multilingual. The same holds true for the relationship between individuals and discourse styles, as we can all, for instance, choose from a variety of registers according to context. How do the discourse styles of the three professional cultures under discussion here help us to understand the Kelly affair?

The answer, I think, lies in the observation that the Kelly affair came to a head not because of a failure of translation or of comprehension across different cultures, but rather because of a failure to anticipate the repercussions which would arise when the acceptable bounds of professional conduct were transgressed. Some of these transgressions involved language, as when Gilligan broadcast too loose and sensational an interpretation of the

---

<sup>64</sup> Transcript of oral evidence given before the Foreign Affairs Committee by Dr David Kelly, [http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/fac/fac\\_1\\_0060to0096.pdf](http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/fac/fac_1_0060to0096.pdf), 27.

<sup>65</sup> Questioning at the Hutton inquiry about this alleged plea-bargain can be found on: <http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/transcripts/hearing-trans39.htm>, 45-51.

<sup>66</sup> Susan Watts and Kelly telephone transcript, [http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/sjw/sjw\\_1\\_0037to0043.pdf](http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/sjw/sjw_1_0037to0043.pdf).

information he had been given by Kelly, or when Campbell had the wording of the dossier changed in order to exaggerate the threat posed by Saddam, or, finally, when Kelly, finding himself publicly humiliated in a televised interrogation by the FAC, lied in an attempt to save face. In each of these cases, however, it is the *inappropriate* use of a particular form of discourse which caused conflict: journalistic language cannot afford to be loose and sensational when serious charges concerning the integrity of the government are in question; neither can political spin be inserted into a factual and objective Intelligence report; nor, finally, can an individual – whether a scientist or not – be caught lying to Parliament. The prototypical discourse features discussed above are, therefore, more revealing in the breach than in the application.

## Transgressions

Transgressions in the appropriate use of language are only part of a larger issue that must also be addressed if the clash of professional cultures witnessed in the Kelly affair is to be understood. It is perhaps a truism that all professions have to navigate between constraining values that are often distinctive to that particular professional culture. Thus, the BBC, in the case of investigative journalism, must steer a course between the Scylla and Charibdis of breaking news and maintaining the standard of accuracy on which it stakes its reputation. Similarly, the British government, with regard to the Iraq dossier, needed to steer a course between advocacy and factuality, whereas David Kelly had to find a middle way between the official secrets act which bound him to silence and his own sense of professional and personal integrity, which compelled him to denounce the government for misrepresenting intelligence. The intelligence services themselves face the daunting challenge since 9/11 of securing reliable sources on the one hand while ascertaining the security of the country against imminent but - by their terrorist nature - unconfirmed attacks on the other.

One of the most interesting consequences of the David Kelly affair is the discrepancy between codes of professional conduct and modes of professional practice that have emerged within each culture. The Hutton inquiry placed a wealth of evidence into the public domain on how the government and the BBC operate, providing the general public with an unprecedented insight into where and how their *modi operandi* fall short of best practices. Lord Hutton's judgement on the nature and degree of such shortfalls and transgressions provoked the heated debate which ensued precisely because the public was in a position to have its own informed opinions. His judgement, which largely absolved the Campbell and the Blair administration and placed the blame for the Kelly affair with Gilligan and more broadly with the BBC, clearly did not coincide with those of the general public and was seen as a whitewash.<sup>67</sup> Lord Butler's subsequent inquiry, although more critical of Blair's administration and *modus operandi*, was also judged by many to be an exercise in diplomatic appeasement.<sup>68</sup>

Given the plethora of opinions with regard to who transgressed where, when, and how, this section can only summarise some of the more consensual judgements on professional misconduct. Thus, Andrew Gilligan is generally seen as guilty of bad record keeping, loose language, overstated if not actually false accusation against the government, and failure to

---

<sup>67</sup> See, for instance, the *Independent* of 29 January 2004, available online at <http://news.independent.co.uk/uk/politics/story.jsp?story=485689>.

<sup>68</sup> Norman "Like Jeeves . . . .," <http://www.guardian.co.uk/butler/story/0,14750,1263454,00.html>.

protect his source. The BBC itself was found guilty of a score of other shortcomings, including slack editing and the over-protection of its staff.

Alastair Campbell, although he was officially exonerated, was perceived by many to have trespassed on intelligence in his contributions to the dossier. Campbell is also widely perceived as having waged a personal war on the BBC and of having conducted a vendetta against Gilligan, pushing his requests for an apology far beyond the measured exchange professional conduct would condone. One of the most serious transgressions of a spin-doctor is to become the story itself. The question arises as to whether Campbell genuinely had difficulty in managing his anger, or whether he was using his anger intentionally as a decoy from the question of the legality of the war, to one of truth, a value so fundamental in Western society that it, perhaps more than any other value, provokes strong and often unconsidered reactions of allegiance and condemnation.

Finally, David Kelly broke the terms of his contract and the Official Secrets Act in conducting unauthorised conversations with the press. Hoon considered this a serious disciplinary matter, and Richard Hatfield, the Ministry of Defence personnel chief wrote to Kelly condemning these “serious breaches of departmental procedure.” However, Kelly, most damningly of all, lied to Parliament, thereby not only committing perjury, but also breaking his own moral code of conduct and trustworthiness.

### *Truth and Good Faith*

Whereas the preceding discussion of professional conduct falls under the heading of what the culturalist Geert Hofstede calls “organisational cultures,” the notion of truth reaches into the heart of national culture and belongs to those basic values which situate culture “in our guts, not in our minds.”<sup>69</sup> According to Hofstede, basic values such as truth and lies or good and evil are strong emotions with a minus and a plus pole and are generally - and often unconsciously - learned before the age of ten. Whereas national cultures are rooted in these basic values, professional cultures are rooted in practices, which can be learned at any age.

Of course, on occasion national and professional cultures coincide. In the Kelly affair, the basic value of truth and falsehood came to dominate the discussion of professional misconduct, ultimately monopolising so much attention that comparatively little discussion ensued regarding the most serious of all charges of professional misconduct – whether the war on Iraq was legal, and whether the Blair administration misused its mandate and misled parliament and the people into waging it.

The status of truth and falsehood as a basic value in our society accounts for the passionate nature of the accusations and denials of falsehood uttered across the political and media spectrum. The following is only a small sample: “The allegation that I lied is itself the real lie. . . . had the allegation [of dishonesty] been true, it would have merited my resignation” (Tony Blair); “The PM told the truth, the Government told the truth, I told the truth. The BBC . . . did not” (Alastair Campbell); “Hutton is the truth” (senior official); “An even more important issue . . . is that your own people should be told the truth” (Andrew Gilligan); “The most important thing, undoubtedly, is to tell the truth to the public” (Gavin Davies, BBC); “We are resolute that the BBC should not step back from its determination to search for the truth” (BBC staff in a collective advert published in response to Lord Hutton’s judgement); “At stake is whether both the government and the BBC can be trusted to tell the truth” (BBC Panorama programme).

---

<sup>69</sup> See Hofstede’s conference presentation at DiploFoundation, Malta, February 2004 <http://www.diplomacy.edu/Conferences/IC2/>, and his paper in this volume.

In contrast to the seemingly non-negotiable nature of basic values such as truth for those whose culture is defined by them, the following reaction from Salam Pax, the Baghdad Blogger, reflects the amused incomprehension of those with a more cynical perspective on truth, especially as uttered by politicians:

So your government's marketing campaign turned out to be a fraud: I would have thought the "west" would be very sceptical of marketing campaigns in general, and government-funded ones especially, but that doesn't seem to be the case.<sup>70</sup>

Truth, it is believed by many, is a social construct.<sup>71</sup> The definition of a word, any word, is itself also a social construct. This is because meaning is consensual – the result of an agreement within a speech community over the semantic remit of a word. Thus, English speakers (and within that superset, the speakers of various regional, social and professional dialects), come to a working agreement over what constitutes "truth" as opposed to "falsity," "fudge," "spin," "underspecification," "embellishment" and other sibling terms in the same semantic field. Nevertheless, it is precisely because the meanings of words are consensual that they are also negotiable: an individual's idiolectal, or a given community's dialectal, usage is subject to wholesale adoption, adaptation or rejection by other speakers. It is this property of language that leaves meaning open to debate and subject to change.

In the Hutton and Butler reports, the definition of truth was assumed, never discussed. In determining that the "strengthening of language" in the September dossier did not amount to a lie or to wilful deception and that it was done in good faith, the category membership of "truth" was determined from above by *dictat*. Dissent with these judgements is still possible, of course, but only in a social rather than a legal context. The slipperiness of what counts as true or false in the eyes of the law is well illustrated by the following legal brief: "Many categories of response which are misleading, evasive, nonresponsive or frustrating are nevertheless not legally 'false' [including] literally truthful answers that imply facts that are not true."<sup>72</sup>

It is not surprising, therefore, to find that falsehood comes in many guises, and the most salient of these are illustrated here with reference to the Kelly affair. David Kelly, Andrew Gilligan and Geoffrey Hoon are all guilty of outright lies: Kelly in his denial that his words as recorded by Susan Watts were his own; Gilligan in his claim that his reporting was accurate, and in his promise to protect his source (he revealed Kelly's name to the MPs Sambrook and Chidgey, both on the FAC); and Hoon in his assertion that "I certainly think that every reasonable step was taken to ensure that Dr Kelly was properly supported, yes" which, in the light of the Ministry of Defence's "naming strategy," and in the lack of any follow up care or support for Kelly once he was fed to the dogs, is a far cry from ensuring protection and is, therefore, undeniably untrue.

The "naming" or "outing" strategy itself, whereby journalists were invited to guess the name of the weapons inspector Gilligan had spoken to and would have their correct guess confirmed, provides an example of duplicity, another form of falsehood. *Praeteritio*, the rhetorical device whereby one makes mention of a subject by denying that one will talk about it (as in "far be it for me to tell you that the password is 'xyz'"), has, since the Greeks, been used as

---

<sup>70</sup> *The Guardian*, 18 September 2003.

<sup>71</sup> See the philosophical writing of David Hume, and the discussion in Jeremy Campbell, *The Liar's Tale: A History of Falsehood* (New York: Norton, 2001), 11.

<sup>72</sup> Legal brief filed by President Clinton's lawyers to a committee of the Arkansas Supreme Court which recommended that he be disbarred for "serious misconduct," cited in Campbell, *The Liar's Tale*, 11.

a duplicitous way of mentioning something while seemingly not saying it. The Ministry of Defence adapted *praeteritio* when it denied naming Kelly because its spokesmen had not actually uttered the word “Kelly.” And subsequent claims by No. 10 that “the government has ‘absolutely and categorically’ denied the intention was to provide clues to help journalists uncover his name” simply defy belief.

The main unresolved charge of falsehood remains whether No. 10 was guilty of taking Britain to war by deception. As we have seen, Lord Hutton exonerated Tony Blair and his administration of knowingly misleading parliament and the people. Yet in the judgement of many critics, the omission and backgrounding of the reservations of experts on the actual threat posed by Saddam, and the promotion of remote possibilities as “real and current” threats amount to deception if not to bare-faced lying.

Similarly, the government’s underspecification of the nature and capability of the WMDs referred to in the 45-minute claim can also be classified as a form of deception. Intelligence Security Committee chairwoman, Ann Taylor, judged that “The omission of the context and the assessment allowed speculation as to its exact meaning. This was unhelpful to an understanding of the issue,”<sup>73</sup> but concluded that Defence Secretary Hoon, although “potentially misleading” in his evidence in July, had not actually lied to the committee.

The question then arises, what is the difference between lies and deception? According to Hutton and Taylor, it would seem that the omission of relevant information, the spin-laden strengthening of language and the non-prototypical usage of commonplace terms may be considered as misleading but do not qualify as lies. Yet the use of misleading language is undeniably a form of deception, and deception is a close cousin to lying and falsehoods. How significant are these shades of meaning? Are we not splitting hairs in a semantic field in which it is compromising to be caught no matter which corner of it one occupies?

The answer to this, I believe, is both yes and no. Yes, mud sticks, but, more significantly, perhaps, no, a lie is a basic value and judged as utterly wrong. A fudge or a wriggle or an omission or underspecification or an embellishment or even a deception, when committed in “good faith,” are much milder variants on a theme associated with what we still judge to be acceptable human frailty.

What then is the relationship between truth and good faith? Since the commonly accepted definition of “to lie” involves wilful deception, in denying that an act constitutes a lie, one can focus on either the semantic component of wilfulness or that of deception. Since the definition of deception was never adequately elucidated, the question of intention – of whether the act, deception or not, was done in good or bad faith – became the determining issue. Good faith, however, is less vulnerable to empirical evidence than is deception, since the measure of good faith is *assertion* not fact, just as the measure of conviction politics, of which Blair is such a committed advocate, is the strength of beliefs rather than the pertinence of policies. It follows, therefore, that whereas disagreement is likely to arise over what actions add up to deception, the presence or absence of good faith cannot so readily be debated and is more prone to be taken on trust. Thus, despite Tony Blair’s lip service to the value of debate (see the Big Conversation in Autumn 2003<sup>74</sup> and his recognition, post Butler, that debate concerning the September dossier

---

<sup>73</sup> “Hoon Criticized over Iraq Report,” CNN News, 19 December 2003, available online at <http://www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/europe/09/11/uk.report/>.

<sup>74</sup> “Blair Launches Big Conversation,” *BBC News*, 28 November 2003, available online at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/3245620.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/3245620.stm); The Big Conversation website, <http://www.bigconversation.org.uk/index.php?id=684>.

was likely to continue), his emphasis on good faith, a term which he repeats as many as seven times in his parliamentary response to the Butler Report, reveals that where debate on what constitutes deception is concerned, he has secured the last word.<sup>75</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper started out by investigating the part language played in the clash of professional cultures that occurred in the Kelly affair. It determined that although the discourse styles of the journalistic, political and scientific cultures under analysis could indeed be seen to conform with their respective stereotypes, the conflict lay not in the prototypical use of professional language but in its inappropriate use: Gilligan was imprecise; Campbell exaggerated; and Kelly lied. The discussion of language was, therefore, complemented by an overview of transgressions with a view to understanding how breaches in the professional codes of conduct that characterise each of the cultures under investigation led to the ensuing debacle. The focus on transgressions inevitably led to the subject of deception, since truth and lies represent a basic value in Western culture and deception is perceived as the most unpardonable transgression. The discussion of deception, in turn, brought us back to the question of language and the problem of definition: in particular, of what constitutes a lie. It also raised the thorny issue of good faith and of having to “take somebody’s word for it.”

I would like to conclude with the following observation: despite the heavy price incurred by the Kelly affair, which included loss of life, loss of jobs, and loss of trust, the outcome of this clash of professional cultures was beneficial in many ways. The Kelly affair revealed weaknesses in the BBC that led to the implementation of stricter codes of practice. It opened the curtain on the workings of the British government that led to recommendations for changes which have been acknowledged and will (Blair assures us) be adopted. It also alerted the public to the use and abuse of spin, which has led Blair to announce an end to spin and which, more realistically, will defuse the effect of subsequent uses of spin. However, one area which has not yet been satisfactorily addressed by the various inquiries which have followed in the aftermath of the Kelly affair is that of decoy and deflection. It would seem that the Blair administration has masterfully deflected attention away from those issues on which public attention needs to focus, such as the appropriate use of intelligence, the proper conduct of government and the legality of the war. Both with regard to the storm about truth, and more recently with regard to the presence of good faith, basic values have been used as decoys to focus passions and distract analysis.

The use of basic values as decoys has already been witnessed with regard to fear of terrorist attacks and the erosion of personal liberty and may well become a feature of this new age of public diplomacy, since the most efficient way to counter dissent from an increasingly well-informed populace is to cut through intellectual argument and empirical evidence by appealing not to the mind, but to the gut. This is the subject of another paper. I would like to end with the words of Henry Porter in *The Observer*: “The issue is not whether Campbell lied; it is whether he and Blair got it wrong and skewed the process of government to forge the dossier that took us to war.”<sup>76</sup> Can we know which sense of the word “forge” he had in mind - the act of “creating” or that of “counterfeiting”? Beware the consequences of a false inference!

---

<sup>75</sup> Blair’s response to the Butler Report, available online at <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/print/page6109.asp>.

<sup>76</sup> Henry Porter, “Are We All Mad, or Is It Hutton?,” *The Observer*, 1 February 2004, <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/focus/story/0,6903,1136400,00.html>.