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Development in Practice

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713412875>

Editorial

Online Publication Date: 01 August 2007

To cite this Article: Eade, Deborah (2007) 'Editorial', Development in Practice, 17:4, 467 - 470

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/09614520701469260

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09614520701469260>

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Editorial

Deborah Eade

'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less.'

'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.'

'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master – that's all.'

(Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*, 1871)

Winnie-the-Pooh sat down at the foot of the tree, put his head between his paws, and began to think. First of all he said to himself: 'That buzzing noise means something. You don't get a buzzing noise like that, just buzzing and buzzing, without its meaning something.'

(A. A. Milne, *Winnie-the-Pooh*, 1926)

The immediate genesis for this special issue of *Development in Practice* was the UNRISD conference 'Social Knowledge and International Policy Making', held in Geneva 20–21 April 2004, which addressed the role of ideas in shaping policy (Utting 2006). In writing up the official conference report (UNRISD 2004), I was powerfully reminded how deeply the concepts and language of international development are embedded in Northern European and North American donor cultures and the multilateral agencies that they largely control. The intellectual contribution and cultures of the recipient countries, even those where English is the medium of higher education, are, as Adebayo Olukoshi pointed out, consigned to the textboxes of influential reports by the World Bank and other UN specialised agencies; on average only two per cent of the citations in such reports refer to African research. In this way, scholars in the South are enlisted to provide case studies to suit the 'theoretical frameworks and analysis [for the formulation of policy proposals by] institutions in the North' (UNRISD 2004:11). Where English is not the prime language of scholarship, let alone the language in which most people communicate, the exclusion is greater still. In a review of this journal's translation strategy, Mike Powell found 'bilingual, regionally oriented development practitioners in West Africa struggling to interpret and reconcile the very different development discourses coming out of Anglo-Nordic and Francophone intellectual traditions' (Powell 2006:523).¹

If Southern researchers and development practitioners break into the international market, it is increasingly as consultants, whose conceptual frameworks and the language they are expected to use are by definition determined by the commissioning body. The whole process neatly illustrates Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony, whereby the values of the ruling culture – in this case, the captains of the Development Industry – capture the ideology, self-understanding, and organisations of the working class – in this case, those whose lives are most significantly affected by international development policies and by the ministrations of development assistance.

It was in the context of these conference discussions that our guest editor, **Andrea Cornwall**, presented a paper co-authored with Karen Brock, 'Taking on Board New Concepts and Buzzwords', in which she dissected the benign-sounding terms that pepper mainstream development policy and whose use is *de rigueur* for anyone working in this field.² It is acceptable, sometimes expected, to show a certain critical distance from established shibboleths such as 'community' or 'empowerment'. But there is no refusing to adopt them as if they didn't exist; the rhetorical trick is to demonstrate one's awareness that the meaning of such words is woolly and imprecise, and then go ahead and employ them, safely quarantined within inverted commas. Sometimes such terms have been captured or co-opted by powerful agencies and in the process have lost any radical or critical edge that they might once have had – rather as a bee's life is doomed once it has lost its sting. The aim then is to decide whether the term has anything left worth saving, or to leave it to its fate. More often, a buzzword will have a multitude of meanings and nuances, depending on who is using it and in what context – what might be called the Humpty Dumpty Syndrome.³ Or these words appear to convey one thing, but are in practice used to mean something quite different, or indeed have no real meaning at all. The use of tough-sounding language does not provide any immunity to the effects of a deeper ideology. The process by which 'non-negotiable policies' lose their mandatory power is described by Sarah Hlupekile Longwe in her pithy analysis of the 'evaporation of gender policies' somewhere between SNOWDIDA, the international co-operation agency of 'Snowdia, a very isolated nation in the North', and their application in SNOWDIDA's programme in 'the People's Republic of Sundia, one of the least-developed countries of Southern Africa' (Hlupekile Longwe 1997: 149).

Remarkably, it has taken only 60 years or so for Developmentspeak, a peculiar dialect of English, to become the *lingua franca* of the International Development Industry. Its pundits inhabit all the major institutions of global governance, the World Bank – as befits its role as the world's Knowledge Bank (see Robin Broad's contribution to this issue; also Cohen and Laporte 2004) – taking the lead in shaping the lexicon: burying outmoded jargon, authorising new terminology and permissible slippage, and indeed generating a constant supply of must-use terms and catchphrases. Its speakers are found in all corners of the world, giving local inflections to the core concepts, thus making the adoption of Developmentspeak an essential qualification for entry into the Industry. The extraordinary thing about Developmentspeak is that it is simultaneously descriptive and normative, concrete and yet aspirational, intuitive and clunkily pedestrian, capable of expressing the most deeply held convictions or of being simply 'full of sound and fury, signifying nothing'. This very elasticity makes it almost the ideal post-modern medium, even as it embodies a modernising agenda.⁴

This is certainly not to say that anything goes. Indeed, in this issue we have sought to bring together a range of scholars, activists, and aid workers – many of whom have at some time played all three roles, and most of them reasonably fluent in Developmentspeak – who nevertheless care about language. Language can confer the power to name, to set out the boundaries of what is thinkable; it can also be used to expose and therefore challenge such power. This is not, therefore, an attempt to establish some kind of Royal Academy of Developmentspeak in order to pronounce on how words may or may not be used; nor to embark on a heroic attempt to restore important terms to their pre-lapsarian state of linguistic innocence. Rather, it reflects a shared concern about the way in which buzzwords serve to numb the critical faculties of those who end up using them, wrapping up all manner of barbed policies and practices in linguistic cotton wool. If this issue of *Development in Practice* convinces readers not to take any item of Developmentspeak at face value, gives them the confidence to identify cant, and emboldens them to be vigilant about (and to expose) its pernicious role in restricting the boundaries of thought, and in shaping policy and practice, then our purpose will have been achieved.

Notes

1. Mike Powell's introductory overview to his guest issue of November 2006 spells out the myriad ways in which the increasing domination of the development sector by the English language both excludes those who are not fully fluent in English, and just as importantly '[disempowers] itself by ensuring its ignorance of vitally (and in the case of China increasingly) important intellectual traditions. By failing to engage systematically with local languages, the sector limits its understanding of and its ability to communicate with most of its intended beneficiaries. Addressing the issue of language fully would have large financial and organisational implications, but failure to do so carries the high costs of ignorance and inefficient communication. If development is to be about life, it has to be able to connect with the languages in which its beneficiaries live' (Powell 2006:523).
2. This paper forms the basis of Cornwall and Brock (2006).
3. The opening quotations clearly betray my middle-class English upbringing of the early 1960s; I make no apology for this, for it would be sad indeed if our childhood left us without cultural roots and reference points. Of course, the fictional works of Lewis Carroll, an Oxford don who was also an Anglican clergyman, a logician, and a photographer, and A. A. Milne, an obscure playwright, assistant editor of the satirical magazine *Punch*, and author of children's books and poems, cannot conceivably be regarded as universal or even 'great' authors. They have, however, become 'globalised', albeit in saccharine versions that bear little relation to the original texts and wonderful illustrations, thanks to Walt Disney, Inc.
4. The 'Thirty-eight thousand development programmes' reproduced as a coda to this Editorial emerged in the late 1970s. We have made every effort to find the original source, but without success; if its authors or copyright holders come forward, we will be only too happy to credit them. The interesting thing about this game is how much and how little has changed. Clearly, it pre-dates the international debt crisis, structural adjustment, the 'end of communism', neo-liberalism, and the Washington Consensus; it therefore also pre-dates the series of UN conferences that took place through the 1980s and 1990s: Children, Environment, Women, Population, Human Rights, and Social Development, which together provided such fertile ground for new buzzwords. The now ubiquitous language of New Public Management had yet to permeate the Development Industry. But the essence remains the same, give or take a few missing terms. Readers may therefore enjoy creating more up-to-date versions of the game. We would be pleased to publish the most original contributions in a future issue of the journal.

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Coda: Thirty-eight thousand development programmes

Paradoxically, much of the instrumental value of the conventional vocabulary of development planning rests in its *imprecision* of meaning and its authoritative, technical gloss. Advertising executives and businessmen are very familiar with these 'Buzzwords' – words which make a

pleasant noise but have little explicit meaning. One property of these words is that they may be combined into almost infinite permutations and still ‘mean’ something. To illustrate this we list below 56 words which occur frequently in the planner’s lexicon. These will generate 38,316 development programmes: since the publisher is unaccountably reluctant to print the necessary 950 additional pages, we must prey on the reader’s patience to elaborate it for him or herself. Select one word from each column at random to compose a four-word phrase: for example, A3, B6, C9, D12 = Systematically balanced cooperative action. Or A12, B9, C6, D3 – Comprehensively mobilised rural participation. These may be immediately recognisable, but what do they *mean*? If two or three people were each to write a paragraph explaining one of these phrases to the masses, on behalf of the government of Ruritania, their different interpretations should bear further witness to the malleability of such language.

	A	B	C	D	
1	Centrally	Motivated	Grassroots	Involvement	1
2	Rationally	Positive	Sectoral	Incentive	2
3	Systematically	Structured	Institutional	Participation	3
4	Formally	Controlled	Urban	Attack	4
5	Totally	Integrated	Organisational	Process	5
6	Strategically	Balanced	Rural	Package	6
7	Dynamically	Functional	Growth	Dialogue	7
8	Democratically	Programmed	Development	Initiative	8
9	Situationally	Mobilised	Cooperative	Scheme	9
10	Moderately	Limited	Ongoing	Approach	10
11	Intensively	Phased	Technical	Project	11
12	Comprehensively	Delegated	Leadership	Action	12
13	Radically	Maximised	Agrarian	Collaboration	13
14	Optimally	Consistent	Planning	Objective	14