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Semantic snarls and linguistic purrs

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WHEN the haze was at its height in late 1997, the local media was accused of clumsily denying its existence.

In that time, Malaysia also received huge international attention - due in no small part to the foreign broadcast media which showed footage of Indonesian forest fires and spoke of the smog in Malaysia without distinguishing between the two.

In an article entitled "Word Tricks and Propaganda" in Z Magazine on the Internet, Edward S. Herman talks about the various methods the media (all media) uses to skew messages; methods so subtle they often escape notice, until they are etched deep into the mind.

A masterful command of the language allows a change in nuance and implication without an actual drop in the accuracy level.

"The word "terrorist", for example, is applied to the target enemy (Iran), or the enemies of our friends (Hamas, the PLO, the Kurdish PKK), not the "constructively engaged" governments of Colombia, Israel, Turkey, or (in the 1980s), Savimbi and the apartheid government of South Africa."

The meaning of the word terrorism has also wandered from its origin. Once used to depict violence carried out by the state (as in the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution), it is now inextricably associated with anti-government, anti-establishment violence.

Democracy, meaning a system of government by the whole population, now more commonly means adhering to electoral processes.

Herman also talks of the use of words that "purr" and words that "snarl".

Words that purr exude virtue, have positive tones and generally warm the heart. Such words are: Reform, responsible, accountability, choice, jobs, growth, modernisation, national security and stability.

"The "reformers" are always having their patience tested, while never testing the patience of others."

Snarl words - extremist, dictator, terrorist, outlaw - are those which excite feelings of anger, fear and rejection.

"Moderates never snarl, nor can they be outlaws, terrorists, dictators or reckless." "Moderate and pro-Western", says Herman, are linked to ideas of stability.

Pro-Western moderates like Saudi Princes or Suharto are never "dictators" like Fidel Castro. If they are not actually called moderates, approval is shown in other ways. A New York Times report on July 28, 1996, said of Suharto: "Even his critics (unnamed) acknowledged that he had brought growth and prosperity to this country of 190 million people."

More recently, on CNBC Asia's production "Asia in Crisis", aired on Oct 3, questions directed at the Malaysian Foreign Minister were liberally peppered with words like apartheid, sanctions, embarrassment and isolation.

When Anwar was released from detention under the Internal Security Act, the Asian Wall Street Journal headlined the story "Malaysian Police Loosen Grip on Anwar."

One often-used tactic is innuendo; phrases like "linked", "it is reported" and "officials claimed", lend an air of authority and do away with the need for information to be traced to a verifiable source. This is even more effective in a country where people are perceived as being unable to speak their minds freely.

On Sept 21, the Asian Wall Street Journal wrote: "Witnesses said the

former deputy prime minister was handcuffed before being taken away in a police van...". But photographs clearly showed Datuk Seri Anwar raising one hand to the crowd before being led away.

The same paper the next day reported that Umno Youth leader Ahmad Zahid Hamidi had been "arrested under the Internal Security Act after refusing to resign his party post."

The word "after" is accurate; one event followed another. But it can also be interpreted as "because", changing the whole meaning of the sentence.

In the Sept 17 issue of the Far Eastern Economic Review, Dr Mahathir was called "an elderly nation-builder who believes strong authority is essential...", while Anwar was "a more progressive, internationally-minded reformer who advocates wider freedoms at all levels of society."

One of the easiest ways to make a point is to contrast it to something else. Black stands out most clearly against white. If the Prime Minister had not been "internationally-minded", it is doubtful whether the world would be interested in our domestic situation today.

\* Z Magazine is an independent political magazine that critiques political, cultural, social and economic life in the United States. The magazine's website is located at [www.zmag.org/zmagwatch.htm](http://www.zmag.org/zmagwatch.htm)

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