Demeaning of Meaning

By PAUL DICKSON

Since the election of President Nixon, the demeaning of meaning has continued unabated. As it was in the beginning, the current official effort is to make everything—no matter how extraordinary—sound routine with the emphasis on giving the war a patina of normality, optimism and even dullness. The effort to play things down in this current phase is generally reminiscent of the early UnWar period characterized by low-key words. It is a distinct dialect, but close enough to the first to be called UnWar II.

Late last year, for instance, Defense Secretary Melvin Laird insisted time and again that the ill-fated, out-of-the-ordinary raid to rescue P.O.W.'s from North Vietnam was a routine SAR (for search and rescue) operation—a term normally used to describe rescue efforts of a much smaller size and scope. The presently popular construction, "routine, limited-duration, reinforced, protective reaction air strike," sounds more like the name of a paper given by a theoretical·physicist than what it is—an air attack. "Limited air interdiction" tends to evoke a picture of a poorly funded soil aeration program rather than heavy bombing in Laos. And in the current dialect there is no such word as "invasion." Rather it is "an incursion"—a term that makes one think of a somewhat impolite excursion.

Once again the introduction of a new dialect has been accompanied by a shift in the predominant official tense. This time most statements are made in the present ("Vietnamization is working") and the past (as in Nixon's "mission accomplished" speech to the Marines last April). The future tense is used only sparingly and then in conjunction with terms like the President's beloved promise of a "just peace" following on the heels of Vietnamization. "Just peace," which translates as "continued war without American combat troops," is as cruel a misuse of the word peace as came from President Johnson, who was "waging the peace," "conducting a peace-keeping action" or saying, "Our purpose is not war but peace"—a slogan minted in mid-1966 when U.S. bombers were hitting Haiphong and Hanoi.

It took years, but at last the words and phrases of Vietlish began to falter. Gallup's pollsters found last March that seven out of ten Americans believed the Administration was veiling facts about the war. Probably the quotation from the war which will be longest remembered is that of the unnamed American major who said of the village of Bentre, "It became necessary to destroy the town to save it."

Many of the words and terms of the war are by now so completely·debunked and abused that if they were not so laden with tragedy they would be funny. Among them: "pacification," "light at the end of the tunnel," "body count," "free-fire zone," "hearts and minds of the people," "suspected Vietcong target," "kill ratio," "target of opportunity," "quantification," and "search and destroy"—the last a term that even the most sluggish G.I. and junior high school student understands really means to "destroy and then search."

The semantic lesson of Vietnam is not that in the final analysis words began to fail those who coined them, but that they succeeded so well for so long. Obfuscating terminology buys time and continues to do so today. This is the time during which the cat-and-mouse game of verbal coinage and debunking occurs. Despite claims to the contrary, the war is still very much on and no doubt more terms will be coined for the periods ahead. For instance, yesterday's "advisers" may be tomorrow's "instructors," "support staff" or "technicians." And while "protective reaction" is still doing its job—as evidenced by the fact that so many newspapers repeat it without so much as a set of quotation marks—some publications have caught on, and its time may be drawing nigh. What will come in its place? Perhaps it is time for a revival of President Johnson's pet, "positive response," to cover such attacks, or perhaps it will be something new like "withdrawal-affiliated sortie."

Even though the language of the Vietnam war is wearing thin and requiring more frequent changes to keep us off balance, other life-and-death terms remain generally unchallenged. "Atomic device," which sounds like the name for a power plant, still passes for "thermonuclear weapon." People have long since stopped flinching when they hear "Defense Department," even though that agency does more and more of its business away from home. The ever-so-comforting term "national security" gets applied without public outcry to far-flung outrages such as invoking it as a reason for keeping American reporters out of Laos or for opposing publication of the Pentagon Papers.

The time has come for a citizen militia of verbal vigilantes who know the difference between a war and a "just peace" and who in their own speech apply the principles of the truth-in-packaging laws. With notable exceptions, the two groups in the best position to call verbal bluffs and reveal word-pollution have, regrettably, not done so. First, the press has too often babbled in official jargon or used its own weasel words to tell us what is happening. For instance, it has been only recently that more than a few periodicals have started calling war-related lies "lies" instead of "elements in the credibility gap," or "evidence of lack of candor." Second, the nation's professional linguists and semanticists seem to have decided to examine the martial language of today from the safer vantage of a decade or so hence. A search of current journals in these fields reveals that the terminology and slang of World War II have just recently become acceptable for scholarly analysis.

The best way to clear the air is to begin translating official Pentagonese and Vietlish into concise, de-euphemized English as was recently done when Senator Birch Bayh of Indiana boiled down the Administration's Vietnam policy to its essence: "It is bombing four·countries, and has invaded two, in order to withdraw from one."