

Misappropriating Mistruths

by Theodore Dalrymple

A single word – there will be no prizes for guessing which – caught my eye in the following headline, published by the news service of one of my internet servers:

‘Katie Hopkins makes statement after writing series of mistruths in Mail.’

Mistruths? What is a mistruth? A lie, an untruth, an error? The word is a neologism invented or used by the bureaucratic mind that is comfortable only with imprecision and evasion. Would anyone expect that a person who used such a word was himself truthful?

A similar word, though more commonly used, is *missteps*: as in, for example, ‘Hitler brought ruin on Germany by a series of missteps’ or ‘Mao Tse-Tung caused the greatest famine in history by a series of missteps.’

A misstep sounds like a clumsy movement in ballroom dancing whose worst consequence is pain in an unfortunate partner’s toes, but it is more often to explain, or at least to describe, how a disastrous situation has arisen. But if anyone were to claim that he had made missteps, we should at once suspect that he was covering something up, almost certainly his own malice or bad intentions.

People say and write things that are untrue for a number of reasons. They may lie in a conscious effort to spread falsehood and to manipulate others, or they may be innocent victims of such efforts themselves. They may be negligent in seeking truth, or merely indifferent as to whether what they say is true without actively preferring falsehood.

The *mistruths* referred to in the headline were false

allegations rather than, say, factual errors concerning the number of legs centipedes may have or the climatic conditions in Porto Alegre. Why not say so, then? Why use thus ugly, imprecise and evasive neologism?

It cannot have been from fear of libel, for to say that a writer has made false allegations carries no imputation of malice: the falsehood of the allegations resides in their lack of correspondence with the facts, not in the motives of the writer.

The headline is an example of bureaucratic journalese for an audience that is presumed by the writer neither to notice nor to care. But if we do not care about language, we will soon not care about things, in the way that, according to Heine, people will one day be burnt where books are burnt.

We should not allow ourselves to misstep our way to mistruth, for that way lies misprobity, miswisdom and mishappiness.

First published in