

On the Fallacies III

3. *Figure of Speech.*

The incidence of this fallacy in English is low, since it depends on languages which are highly inflected, such as Latin. But it does pop up now and then, and is often seen in an improper obversion (the conversion of an affirmative statement to a negative one). The safe way to negate a term is with the prefix “non.” The prefixes “in” and “un,” or the suffix “less” may make for better English, but they sometimes have an intensive rather than a negative significance. Consider the following words, and you’ll see the problem:

agreeable.....	nonagreeable	disagreeable
sensible	nonsensible.....	senseless
flammable	nonflammable.....	inflammable
holy	nonholy.....	unholy
moral.....	nonmoral	immoral
valuable.....	nonvaluable	invaluable
habitable.....	nonhabitable	Inhabitable

So when we try to make our point, or understand the point of another, it is important to pay attention to obversions.

4. *Fallacies of Accent.*

Since there is a margin between thought and speech, any written or spoken sentence can have its meaning completely changed just by accenting a single word. “This is a fine country” can be quite different if uttered by a July 4th speaker at the VFW, or by someone who just finished filling out his income tax report. Take the following sentence, and accent it differently, and you’ll come up with a number of different meanings:

She will obey her superior. (She, but not necessarily others.)
She *will* obey her superior. (Command, as against prediction.)
She will *obey* her superior. (She will act only under obedience.)
She will obey *her* superior. (But not other superiors.)
She will obey her *superior*. (But no one else.)

One could add even more meanings by adding exclamation and question marks.

Mistakes in argument resulting from the ambiguities which arise from variations in emphasis of a single word are also called fallacies of accent. An example in English is by two pronunciations of invalid.

Every *invalid* needs medical care.
But every fallacy is *invalid*.
Therefore every fallacy needs medical care.

Fallacies of accent are more frequent in spoken than written speech, for an ironic or sarcastic intonation can radically change the meaning of an otherwise straightforward assertion. Many a weak argument has gained strength from a bold, confident manner of speaking. For instance, Fr. Dupre showed me a clip on the Internet of the debate between

Sarkozy and Royal. Royal showed how Sarkozy was really wrong on a point, and she became angry in pointing out his mistake. Instead of admitting to it, he simply took a fatherly tone and began to point out the problem of losing one’s temper.

Many a truth has been clouded or subverted by those who:

*Damn with faint praise, consent with civil leer;
And without sneering teach the rest to sneer. (Pope)*

A newspaper then can change the importance of an event just by the size of the headline of the article. Position of the story in the paper has its effect.

A message in large, eye-compelling letter is often qualified by unscrupulous salesmen with a line of unobtrusive print:

SELLING OUT
(present stock)
ALL MAKES DVD PLAYERS \$15
(and up)

The small print in legal documents used to conceal trickery is so established that now, few will sign a document without reading it, and understanding all of it. The term “special pleading” is one of the prevalent species of this fallacy. It consists in the employment of and argument in one context without permitting it in another. Thus a lukewarm Catholic might say, “I have the right to my opinion! (And the Pope has no right to his.)” Idleness and leisure among the super wealthy can be praised as gracious living, but condemned in the poor as character corroding.

“Stacking the deck” is another variant of this fallacy. It consists in slanting an argument by a one-sided selection of facts. A book may be unfairly reviewed by stressing unimportant trivialities. A character may be destroyed by focusing on a few failures or a minor flaw. Almost any tract from the Seventh Day Adventist Church or the Jehovah’s Witnesses will exercise the stacking of the deck when they write about the Catholic Church. One often sees the stacking of the deck in traditionalist Catholic papers or books, when they speak about Vatican II or the New Mass. Don’t get me wrong, for I too have my criticisms of that Mass and Council. But stacking the deck is the wrong way to criticize, and it works against the truth.

A rich source of all the fallacies may be found in any one of the large newspapers for sale here in Denver. They’ll be hours of fun for the whole family in finding them!