

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a 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.”

The Trump Administration’s attitude toward language seems more akin to Humpty Dumpty’s than to Alice’s. The Administration often makes statements that are puzzling or even bizarre-seeming to outsiders, because they fail to understand that the Administration uses terms in unusual and sometimes unique ways. This can lead to misunderstanding. This brief lexicon should help clear up the confusion. You may find it helpful to download it to your phone for easy reference, in case you need to decode documents from the White House or agencies such as EPA.

Air Quality (n.) Air that is high in nutrients such as SO₂, ozone, and nitrogen oxides, as in “President Trump has improved our air quality.”

Cost-Benefit Analysis (n.) An analysis of a regulation’s harmful effects on a regulated industry. Pronounced “Cost Analysis.” The word “Benefit” in the written version is a holdover from earlier eras, when regulations were thought to have positive effects. In the spoken language, the written word is marked only by a slight pause between “cost” and “analysis.”

Endangered Species (n.) A hypothetical category of creatures, akin to griffins and unicorns, of which the Administration has never identified an actual example.

Environmental Protection Agency (n.) A government agency charged with protecting the public from environmentalists. See below for the meaning of “the public.”

Feasible (adj.) Maximizing industry profits, as in: “reducing emissions is clearly not feasible,” meaning that doing so would not maximize industry profits.

Federalism (n.) Placing authority over an environmental problem appropriately, that is, in the hands of the level of government most favorable to business. As a general matter, federalism prohibits granting any authority to the state of California, but applies oppositely to Texas.

Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (n.) A White House office charged with preventing the government’s issuance of information or regulations.

Permit (n.) A government document confirming an individual or company's God-given right to profit without regard to the health or safety of others.

Public (n., adj.) Of or pertaining to the fossil fuel industry, as in "public welfare" (fossil fuel profits) or "public health" (a healthy fossil fuel industry).

Regulation (n.) A government action reducing industry profits.

Rulemaking (n.) Courageously coming to the aid of natural resource companies. Synonyms: rollback, deregulate.

Social Cost of Carbon (n.) A synonym for the words "zero" and "nil."

Taking of Property (n.) See "Regulation."

Water Quality (n.) The degree to which the content of water affirmatively reflects industrial activity. Thus: "Due to the steel mill's heavy discharges, the quality of the water was high."

Wetlands (n.) Underwater areas, otherwise known as lake, river, or sea bottoms. The Obama Administration's belief that the term applies to swamps and marshes can thus be seen as an obvious mistake.

Wilderness (n.) Land that could be better used for profitable activities.

With the aid of this dictionary, it is possible to decode otherwise puzzling statements by the Administration. For instance, "it will harm the public welfare to limit the use of coal and oil" is not only true but undeniable, once properly understood. The sentence translates as "it will harm the welfare of the fossil fuel industry to limit the use of coal and oil." Who could quarrel with the truth of that?

In short, although all the King's horses and all the King's men couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again, his approach to public discourse remains alive and well today.