Title: Shocked and Awed: How the War on Terror and Jihad have changed the English Language
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Author: Fred Halliday
Reviewed by: Arwa Aburawa (Freelance Journalist, Manchester)

Review:

Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me. That's what the nursery rhyme claims but Fred Halliday's book *Shocked and Awed: How the War on Terror and Jihad have Changed the English Language* argues that, in the war on terror, words count for a lot. As George Orwell illustrated in his famous novel *1984* words allow for ideas, thoughts, options to exist and also to be wiped out. They can create false impressions and false beliefs through something called *doublespeak* - for example the Ministry of Love in the novel created war and the Ministry of Truth lied to the people. Halliday's book, is ultimately a study of this use and misuse of language particularly in a political context.

Fred Halliday, who died aged 64 in April 2010, wrote widely on many subjects related to the Middle East as well as the Muslim community in the UK, but *Shocked and Awed* is quite different to his other books. In fact, it's not really a book but a political dictionary of words, turns of phrases and made up terminology which the general public was exposed to in the aftermath of 9/11 and the subsequent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Arranged into twelve chapters, the book studies words that have entered our vocabulary, their meaning, their origins but also- and this is the important bit- the way they influence the way we think and subsequently act. As Halliday reminds us “those who seek to control events, people and their minds also seek to control language.”

The one thing that surprised me about this book was that although the chapters were simply a collection of words which were examined in depth, it was still a really engaging read. As the chapters were short and you didn't need to read every entry you are given a lot more freedom as a reader to dip in and out of the book without losing your thread. Even more surprising was although the chapters didn't have conclusions, after reading a collection of entries you are left with a clear impression of what words must have enabled (usually war and terror) and how words are so skilfully manipulated by politicians.
For example, the seemingly never-ending list of words that ultimately meant torture but avoided the word itself, is indicative of the Blair/Bush administration’s efforts to gloss over the reality of war and their failures to retain the moral high ground. Words used to denote torture include: control technique, environment adjustment, force drift, frequent flyer programme, harsh interrogation techniques, CID treatment, novel ways of extracting information, painful stress positions, philosophical guidance, rubberhose cryptanalysis, uncivilized means, waterboarding, prisoner abuse and walling (chapter 3).

As well dissecting the popular words that have entered the general domain such as rendition and detainee, Halliday explores some of the more obscure and quirky turns of phrase which emerged after 9/11. For example, Honey Traders referred to accusations after 9/11 that Al-Qaeda had infiltrated the honey trade as a cover for its terrorist activities. More sugar in your tea where you’re going is a phrase used by British intelligence investigators of Binyam Mohammed in regards to the prospects of being sent to a third world country where torture was anticipated. The more interesting entries, however, explore the implications of the use of certain words at the expense of others. During the war in Iraq, popular resistance was commonly described as an insurgency which, Halliday states, “denotes armed rebellion and avoids connotations of ’revolution’, ’revolt’, ’rebellion’, all of which are potentially positive... There are also problems with the word ‘uprising’ as it tends to question the legitimacy of the authority the people are rising against: it [’uprising’] never appeared in US discussions of Iraq.”(p.112)

The fourth chapter in the book, The Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, is one of the stronger chapters in the book as you really get a sense of the systematic abuse of information and intelligence that occurred before the ‘war on/of Terror’ which the US and the UK launched. For example, when the CIA did not produce material to support the White House’s claims of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, they were told to ‘re-look’ at the evidence. This taken together with events such as the Plame Affair (where a CIA operative’s identity was leaked to pressure her husband into line after he failed to support claims that Iraq was illegally acquiring uranium) and criticisms from the British intelligence community about the notion that Iraq was ‘a serious and current threat to the UK’ add up to a serious case against Blair and Bush.

Another strength of the book is that Halliday is familiar with 10 languages which is reflected in Shocked and Awed which also looks at Arabic and some Persian words. So, a great way to brush up on your Arabic and Arab/Muslim history if your so inclined. It was also quite interesting to find out more about the origins of certain words and phrases; for instance it was Bernard Lewis and not Samuel Huntington who first popularised the notion of a ’Clash of Civilisations’ and also croissant is the French term for crescent applied to a half-moon shaped pastry in celebration of the defeat of the Ottomans in 1683 outside Vienna. Halliday also has some interesting critique of some words such as Islamophobia which he believes was given misguided support by the Muslim community as it is as “mistaken term, as the prejudice involved is not, in the main, one of hostility to a religion or a set of beliefs (Islam) but rather antagonism to, and propagation of negative stereotypes about, a people or community, Muslims. The more appropriate term would be Anti-Muslimism.” (p.187)
A fascinating and enlightening read, *Shocked and Awed* comes highly recommended to anyone with a short attention span but a deep interest in current affairs, the ways words have portrayed the War on Terror and the intersection of words with power. Although the last four chapters lacked the direction of the rest of the book, Halliday’s passion for words and their ability to shape our reality shines through making this a hugely readable book which will no doubt prove useful in trying to decode our political past and future.