

MEMORANDUM

TO: Erica Payne, The Agenda Project

FROM: Anat Shenker-Osorio

DATE: July 11, 2012

RE: Analysis of "The Machine and the Garden" op-ed by Liu and Hanauer

A NYT op-ed by Nick Hanauer and Eric Liu asserts that "we are prisoners of the metaphors we use, even when they are wildly misleading." In this, Liu and Hanauer's argument is spot on, however beyond that I believe their piece contains assertions that are not only inaccurate and/or unsubstantiated but which also risk cementing deeply conservative beliefs about the economy, the most critical issue we face in our country.

As you know, people use mental models to understand complex information. With regard to the economy, there are several simplifying models used with some frequency (both by lay people and experts). Each model has imbedded within it a unique set of assumptions about what the economy is, how it works, and what (if anything) we ought to do about it. The models are observable through close scrutiny of language. As you have seen, my research in this area includes three separate analyses of underlying beliefs as traceable through careful scrutiny of language data about the economy, economic crisis and inequality. Beyond examining over 10,000 unique constructions demonstrating metaphorical thought, I conducted one-on-one cognitive elicitations with economic experts including Elizabeth Warren, Robert Reich, and Dean Baker. My cognitive linguistic analysis of economic discourse suggests much of what Liu and Hanauer advise is problematic. The concerns highlighted below emerge from my own findings.

1. Conservatives favor language that likens the economy to natural elements because this conveys it is best left to its own devices and comes to us as is.

Most often, the natural elements evoked in economic messaging are bodies ("the economy is unhealthy" "recovery bill"), the weather ("weather this crisis" "turbulent times"), and water ("money flows" "trickle down"). It's no accident that this is the preferred language of conservatives who deify the economy and assure us it should not be tampered with.

Unfortunately, while this kind of language is preferred on the right, we are not immune to using it and, when we do, we are reinforcing ideas directly at odds with how the economy actually operates.

Hanauer and Liu potentially fall into this trap in their use of the garden analogy. By likening the economy to natural elements, they risk triggering a conservative understanding of it and effectively shut down arguments for our preferred policies.

The non-negotiable first step to correcting false assumptions about the economy requires that we compare the economy to things that are manufactured – rather than naturally occurring. We must make it clear that people make and operate the economy and that they ought to benefit from what’s produced.

2. Speaking of the economy as a garden could trigger the thinking that it’s best left on its own.

To the extent garden talk evokes the same assumptions as the elements just mentioned, it commits the same unforgivable error of these other models. Namely, it tells people the economy is something that comes from nature and we can moan about it but not actually influence how it behaves.

Liu and Hanauer offer language that goes dangerously in this direction. By suggesting the economy can be thought of as an “ecosystem,” they throw any desirable role for external control – i.e. regulation, taxation, government programs – out. An ecosystem is entirely self-contained. Outside interference is not only unnecessary, it’s destructive.

3. Mechanistic language, especially likening the economy to a vehicle, offers the most effective arguments for progressive economic policy.

Liu and Hanauer contend that mechanistic language leads audiences to disfavor regulation and taxation without providing any evidence. In fact, the implications of machine language are very promising. First and foremost, vehicles have drivers. They require external control to operate. Second, they operate in a highly regulated context of signals, signs, laws and social conventions. Finally, when they are not operated or maintained properly, they “crash” causing incredible damage and even loss of life.

Directly in contrast to their unproven assertions, over three years of tracking and tagging messaging about the economy, I found mechanistic language much more frequently among Democrats and progressives than from conservatives.

4. People are not likely to understand the economy as a garden.

There is little evidence that this simplification actually exists in our language, in other words, insufficient proof that we can think of the economy in this way. The simplifying models we have for a concept can be numerous but they are never infinite. And they cannot be invented from scratch. Just as I cannot get you to understand “the ingredients of a tasty economy,” the public may not find meaning in the garden analogy.

5. However, economy as garden is related to a little used existing model, the economy as crop.

There is a closely related model available to us of the economy as crop. You can hear this evoked in language like “labor is the only resource *rooted* in our economy” and “*sow the seeds* of sustainable prosperity.” What’s essential here is that this language describes agricultural plants, crops requiring continuous, external, intervention.

Arguably, the garden idea fits into this same kind of mind set. However, there’s no guarantee audiences will call to mind a carefully tended English Tea garden when they’re asked to think about the economy. They could just as easily conjure up the idea of a field of wild flowers that grow on their own. Again, close attention to language could help ensure we don’t convey the wrong things with this analogy.

6. Economy as crop is not widely used and thus may not offer enough accessible language to frame arguments about economic details.

Although it is possible to argue for Liu and Hanauer’s suggested model as another version of the crop comparison, even this does not suggest it will work as the basis for our economic arguments. In contrast to the vehicle and body language mentioned above, language that suggests we can think of the economy as we do a crop is quite rare. This indicates that while American English speakers can comprehend this framework, it is not top of mind for us.

7. Real-world experiments demonstrate that vehicle language persuades skeptical and conservative listeners to consider and even desire progressive solutions.

Not only does analysis of real discourse show a clear preference on the right for language Liu and Hanauer advise progressives to use, linguistic experiments conducted with persuadable and conservative voters in Southern California affirm the superiority of mechanistic language. In focus groups with voters, after priming participants with vehicle language, we were able to alter their initial beliefs about the economy being best left on its own and even saw them recommending progressive taxation and redistribution to ameliorate inequality.

Conclusion:

Offering up messaging advice without evidence on any topic is unadvisable. In this case, when the subject is the economy, it has the potential to inflict further damage on the American people struggling to make ends meet. We cannot afford to keep making the same communication errors we have since the outset of the recession. We must have our explanations for what the economy is and how it operates to promote the basic truths we need audiences to internalize: the economy is person-made, not natural and it requires continuous, outside, control.