



OESTERREICHISCHE NATIONALBANK
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Panel 3: Reforming EU frameworks or EU countries?

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Structure and Structural Change: Weaselword and Jargon (Fritz Machlup, 1958)



Structure and Structural Change: Weaselwords and Jargon

Von

Fritz Machlup

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The existence of homonyms in scientific as well as in everyday language raises no problem when the separate meanings of the same word are sufficiently different to make confusion impossible in the context in which the word is used. If we economists, for example, use the word „labor“, no reader or listener will ever think of the painful muscle contractions preceding childbirth, and if we say „capital“ he may not know precisely what we mean, but he will rarely confuse it with the seat of government in a state or country.

If the separate meanings of the same word are closely related, overlapping, or otherwise ambiguous so that the context cannot be relied upon to indicate which meaning is intended, the writer or speaker has a moral duty. I would say, to state what he means. Often he can do so quite easily and briefly, perhaps upon the first use of the word or phrase in question, provided he uses it consistently. To use it sometimes in one meaning and sometimes in a different meaning without due warning and clarification, is inconsiderate and mischievous. A thoughtful scholar will either look for less ambiguous terms as substitutes or will use adequate modifiers to remove the possibility of misunderstanding or doubt on the part of his audience.

If most of the various meanings of a word are undefined and vague, not merely lacking precision¹, but so obscure that the writer or speaker could not succeed in conveying a definite meaning, then the use of the word should not be condoned. Of course, a word may have some clear and definable and some undefinable, obscure meanings; in this case its use is permissible where the meaning is clear, but not where clear understanding cannot be expected.

If a word is used not to convey any clear meaning at all, but rather as a screen to hide muddled thinking, or perhaps to becloud issues and

¹ We may not know how quickly the air moves and how high the sand is piled up if we are told about a „wind“ and about „sand-dunes“ — to borrow from K. R. Popper examples of words lacking quantitative precision — yet we know what is being talked about. The vagueness or obscurity to which I refer in the text is of a different nature: there we do not know what is being talked about.

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Machlup:

- Only a few **clearer** meanings of „Structure“ ...
 - Many **vague** meanings of „Structure“ ...
 - Some „**crypto-apologetic**“ meanings of „Structure“ ...
- ...in Economics

Possible reasons:

- Certain fundamental **differences in objectives**
- Differences in views concerning the **effectiveness of measures**
- National, regional and individual **differences in preferences**