On Language; Congenital, Liar, Punch – Hillary Clinton

By WILLIAM SAFIREFEB. 4, 1996

WHEN THE GHOST OF THE VITUPERATIVE columnist Westbrook Pegler seized control of an ordinarily temperate New York Times columnist last month, readers were exposed to an opinion with the bark off. Pointing to examples of mendacity through 15 years of commodities trading, Travelgate and Whitewater, he concluded that the First Lady, Hillary Rodham Clinton, was a congenital liar.

The reaction that is of interest to language students centered on the meaning of congenital. An op-ed colleague called to ask: "Did you mean inherited? Shouldn't you have used habitual?" A White House spokesman also picked up this literal interpretation of the adjective, and Mrs. Clinton later chose to escalate the charge in a National Public Radio interview: "My mother took some offense, because being called a congenital liar seems to reflect badly on her and my late father."

From this neutral corner of scholarly tranquillity in the arena of hot controversy, we ask ourselves today: what does congenital mean?

First, the word's history: a doctor formed it in 1796 from the Latin congenitus, "born with," and the term was defined in the 1893 Oxford English Dictionary as "existing or dating from one's birth." In 1848, Charles Kingsley, in "Saint's Tragedy," extended the term into general use: "The mind of God, revealed in laws, congenital with every kind and character of man." Charles Darwin picked it up in his 1862 study of orchids: "The so-called congenital attachment of the pollinia by their caudicles." The critic Matthew Arnold used the adjective in an 1879 essay: "The French people, with its congenital sense for the power of social intercourse and manners."

As the above shows, the meaning has developed from the medical "existing at birth" to a more general "innate, inherent, natural-born." Merriam-Webster's 10th Collegiate uses two examples to show the expansion: first, "existing at or dating from birth (congenital deafness)," then "being such by nature (congenital liar)."

What was the political vituperator's semantic intent? Although he did not return repeated calls, it can be surmised that he rejected habitual, inveterate and chronic as too mild, baldfaced as too trite and pathological as too severe; congenital, with its sense of "innate" and connotation of "continual," must have seemed just right. We know that he asked his copy editor beforehand to read him the definition in Webster's New World Dictionary, and she reported that it came down on innate as the synonym.

The Economist, which characterized the columnist's usage as "vicious and meant to shock," went on to use the adverbial form in its current sense in praising the extemporaneous grammar in an address by the First Lady: "It was the speech of an exceptionally clear mind -- one, surely, congenitally incapable of mysterious lapses of memory."

Though congenital and congenial (as in "Miss Congeniality") were sometimes confused in the past, the former is akin to "genesis" and the latter to "genius."

Liar

"Congenital, conshmenital," said a caller more interested in nouns than adjectives, "did you have to use liar?"

Agreeing to take a call on this purely on background, with no direct quotation (he is evidently intent on keeping a firewall between linguistic and political worlds), the invectivist noted that his first, timorous inclination was to use prevaricator, from the Latin for "to walk crookedly," but the current sense in Webster's New World is "to tell an untruth; lie," a definition that straddles two meanings.

To tell an untruth is not necessarily to lie. Mrs. Clinton, in an exceptionally clear-minded riposte to the congenital liar blast by the columnist, said: "I don't take what Mr. Safire says very seriously. . . . I was working for the committee that impeached President Nixon, for whom Mr. Safire worked and, best I can tell, is still working."

That "committee that impeached President Nixon" is an indisputable untruth; Mr. Nixon was never impeached. However, her statement was not a lie, because she obviously meant "the committee that recommended impeachment to the House." An untruth, which can be an honest mistake, can be labeled a lie or a falsehood only where there is an intent to deceive.

The second euphemism for liar to come to mind was dissembler, from the Latin simulare, "to feign"; the current sense of dissembler is "one who disguises or conceals." However, the trouble with this bookish word is that many people confuse it with disassembler, "one who takes things apart."

At that point, claims my source, the columnist recalled the advice of Winston Churchill, who once satirically called a colleague to account for "terminological inexactitude," but who ultimately decided, "Short words are best, and the old words when short are best of all."

Liar, its two syllables often eliding into one, dates back to Old English. It is unequivocal and unambiguous. In 1988 the columnist denounced Nancy Reagan for accepting expensive designer gowns as gifts and then falsely denying it: "Nancy Reagan knew it, hid it for years, lied when caught." However, some who had accepted that as fair comment rejected its application to this First Lady as "clearly over the line," a tennis metaphor.

Punch

The President's press secretary, Michael D. McCurry, told reporters after reading the "Blizzard of Lies" column that "the President, if he were not the President, would have delivered a more forceful response to that -- on the bridge of Mr. Safire's nose." President Clinton later confirmed this pugilistic wish, but as the First Lady later took pains to point out, "smilingly."

The usage issue here is prepositional. The Washington Times used "punch him in the nose," while The Economist wrote, "Were it not for the constraints of the Presidency, [the President] would be minded to defend the family honor by punching Mr. Safire on the nose."

Which is it -- a punch in or on the nose?

"The set phrase is 'punch somebody in the nose,' " reports William Kretzschmar, working on the Linguistic Atlas Project at the University of Georgia. " 'Punch on the nose' is simply a variant, not a regional difference.

"In this expression, however," says Professor Kretzschmar, "the use of in is more prevalent than the variant on."

Yes, but. These verbal fisticuffs also point up the difference in British usage (on is preferred) and the change in preposition when a spot is specified: McCurry spoke of "the bridge" of the nose -- right between the eyes -- and on lent exactness.