

## *Gunspeak: The Influence of America's Gun Culture on Everyday Communication*

**Robert Myers**  
*Alfred University*

*As illustrated repeatedly in this volume, one of the things sociocultural anthropologists do is pay special attention to the commonplace, to those patterns which are taken for granted by members of a culture. Then we examine these patterns and ask questions about their origins, their obvious and not-so-obvious functions, and just what they mean to the people who use them. Finally, we add our interpretations to what we find. One of the most important aspects of every group is its language. How are some words or expressions used instead of others, and why? This article provides an investigation of one set of words appearing frequently in all forms of communication, nonverbal as well as verbal, spoken as well as written, among English-speaking residents of the United States.*

*Robert Myers is Professor of Anthropology and Public Health at Alfred University in Alfred, New York, where he has taught for twenty years. He received his B.A. from Davidson College, his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and his M.P.H. from the Harvard School of Public Health. He has lived in Europe, conducted fieldwork in the Caribbean, and spent two years at the University of Benin in Nigeria on a Fulbright Fellowship. These experiences lend perspective to his primary interests: contemporary cultural patterns and the roles of language in the United States.*

When I bit the bullet to work on this, I put the subject in my anthropological crosshairs, drew a bead on it, and carefully targeted the topic, although I found it hard not to take a shotgun approach. For a high-caliber analysis, I gathered my ammunition, determined to be armed

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with facts, in order to fire off comments, to be on target, to shoot down any arguments. I'm loaded for bear. I hope not to jump the gun, to be a loose cannon, or to go off half-cocked as a result of my hair-trigger temper, no matter how under the gun I feel to examine this. In short, I used the language of gunspeak to examine one way we speak.

This article describes the linguistic ways an aspect of United States culture, guns, gun-affection, and gun ownership, considered important by significant numbers of citizens, appear in familiar speech. In putting common linguistic elements of the world's third largest society in my sights, I am attempting a small contribution to what Marcus and Fischer call a "repatriated anthropology" in which "the most important subject for cultural criticism . . . is not these conventionally defined topics [of kinship, migrants, public rituals, and ethnic minorities, for example], but the study of mass-cultural forms, and . . . mainstream middle-class life . . . [including] the formation of public consciousness" (1986: 152). According to Traube, anthropologists have shied away from studying American popular culture, regarding it as an "impoverished object," without the "exoticism inscribed in the anthropological culture concept" (1996: 128). However, I see American popular culture as a vast, barely gleaned cultural field, whose residents are as much Exotic Others as any population anywhere. I approach U.S. culture as a native, with the advantage of long-term familiarity and fluency. The tendency in American anthropology to discount work in our own complex society where practices examined may be shared by tens of millions of people, while highly valuing ethnographic work that has been carried out among tiny distant groups, is one of the ironies of our profession. The case of gunspeak stands out as a perfect example, to use Whorf's words, "where the 'fashions of speaking' are closely integrated with the whole general culture" (1941: 93).

To frame this description in sociolinguistic terms, I use the concept of "cultural presupposition," meaning "participants in speech interaction come to encounters with an array of knowledge and understandings (models) of their culture as expressed and transmitted through language" (Bonvillain 2003: 61). The cultural presuppositions underlying gunspeak are taken for granted by its users, and as is normally the case with cultural biases, applied automatically, without conscious reflection or decision-making. As such, the pervasive presence of guns in American culture, in history as mediated by film and story, and through all forms of entertainment and boy enculturative practices, is as familiar and influential as are camels in traditional Bedouin society or cattle among the Nuer.

Gunspeak appears as a diverse semantic field, sometimes almost literally, as with "top gun," or the Gettysburg College logo the "Bullets" and a snack-bar there called "The Bullet Hole"; sometimes indirectly as with the use of "bullets" in list-making (such as the "Bullets and Numbering" option of Microsoft Word I am using), figuratively as in "firing back," or "magic bullet"; and sometimes subtly or symbolically as in applying "gun" to parts of the body or in familiar phrases from popular films. Similes abound, such as "Written words are like bullets. I'm shooting at death" (W. T. Vollmann, author of *Rising Up, Rising Down*, interview, National Public Radio, "Bookworm," November 27, 2004).

Metaphor and metonymy, types of semantic transfer, permeate gunspeak. Metaphor, for example, exists with the common attribution of someone as a "big gun," "big shot," or "hot shot," in which the entire person is identified as prominent or powerful in terms of firearms or firepower. Metonymy, "the substitution of one entity by another based on their shared occurrence in context rather than similarity of their attributes" (Bonvillain 2003: 66), is a more limited form of substitution than metaphor. For example, in two references to body

parts as “guns,” a gun refers only to a specific part of the person. In recent years the fitness and body-building craze has teenage males saying, “Look at my guns,” or “show me your guns,” meaning muscles, particularly biceps. Over the preceding century, the penis has often been referred to as a “gun.” In his novel *Battle Cry*, Leon Uris describes the humiliating instruction of a marine private being taught not to call his rifle a gun: “Jones then stood there, holding his ‘gun’ in his right hand and his rifle in his left and recited: ‘This is my rifle/This is my gun/This is for fighting/This is for fun’ (1954: 53). This same usage appears in at least five other sources (Lighter 1994: 990; Wentworth and Flexner 1967: 235). In a recent popular magazine, a reader wrote to a sex question-and-answer column, “My boyfriend likes to ‘get the bullets out of the chamber’ (you know, masturbate before sex so he can go longer)” (Jill 2006: 94). When considered in its fullest presence and richness, gunspeak is one of our most familiar and useful ways of expressing ourselves, revealing a relationship with firearms so strong it may surprise some. Other examples of metaphor and metonymy appear below.

In their slender volume *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson assert that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action (2003: 3), calling attention to the “often beautiful, sometimes disturbing, but always profound, realities of everyday metaphorical thought” (243). Indeed, gunspeak provides some of those metaphors by which we live.

Gunspeak metaphors describe varied relationships with guns, firearms, and their qualities or projectiles. In some cases people speak of themselves as firearms (a loose cannon; a straight shooter; to target something; to take a shot at something; as having a hair-trigger), or describe themselves as having attributes of a gun (hair-trigger; to be out of bullets or ammunition), or feel shaped by a firearm (to be armed, to feel under the gun). Metaphors of gunspeak suggest cultural attitudes about power and hierarchy embedded in competition. Over and over the influences of firearms seen through the action-based words and images of gunspeak bespeak a contentious society based on ranking, domination, aggression, and conflict. The relationship between culture and metaphor as described by Lakoff and Johnson sounds much like the ideas expressed above by B. L. Whorf: “The most fundamental values in a culture will be coherent with the metaphorical structure of the most fundamental concepts in the culture” (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 22).

## *U.S. Gun Culture*

According to sociologist Gary Kleck, the United States “almost certainly has more firearms in civilian hands than any other nation in the world” (1997: 63). Exact numbers of civilian firearms are arguable and difficult to ascertain, but in 1994 they numbered between 170 million based solely on guns produced since 1954, of which 69 million are handguns, and 235 million when all U.S. civilian guns are counted, of which 80 million are handguns (Kleck 1997: 64). Data suggest that gun-owning households often own more than one. “Among households with a handgun, the average number of handguns owned is about 2.8” (69). Cross-nationally, the proportion of U.S. households with guns in “extraordinarily high,” with Norway a close second at 32 percent (68). Switzerland and Israel are other industrial societies with high rates of gun ownership, yet among these four countries, only the United States has a significant problem with gun-related violence and might be described as gun-obsessed, judging by the high emotions generated by gun-control

debates. The social vigor and political lobbying of the “nearly three million”-member strong National Rifle Association ([www.nramembership.org/history.htm](http://www.nramembership.org/history.htm)), and the fame of its recent leader Charlton Heston’s “not from my cold, dead hands” speech are but two prominent examples of gun-addiction in the United States.

Although the number and rate of firearm-caused deaths in the United States has declined significantly since a high of 39,595 in 1993, the number killed by guns in 2001, the most recent year available, was still 29,573 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2003), a figure not approached in any other industrial nation. In addition to those killed by guns, an estimated three to four times as many suffer nonlethal wounds, numbering perhaps as many as 200,000 ([medlib.med.utah.edu](http://medlib.med.utah.edu)), although these data are not systematically collected. As many as 2.6 million children live in 1.4 million homes where firearms are kept loaded or stored with ammunition (Schuster, Franke, Bastian, Sor, Halfon 2000). Another phenomenon of U.S. firearm deaths is that the percentage of those killed as suicides has steadily grown to 57 percent of all gun deaths in 2001. A gun provides the most common means of suicide, and the most successful. Guns as sources of identity, authority, and power, including the ultimate power to end one’s life, are unrivaled in American culture. Perhaps most striking of all is the accumulation of gun deaths over time. In the last twenty-five years in the United States, a period of remarkable affluence and domestic “peace,” more than 830,000 people have died in gun violence, about fourteen times the number of Americans who died in the Vietnam War.

### *Gunspeak*

Given this background of widespread gun presence, it is unsurprising that an impressive number of words, phrases, and nonverbal gestures pertain to the culture of firearms, and provide us with familiar metaphorical grounding.

We define our honesty and trustworthiness with gunspeak when we call someone a straight-shooter, or our willingness to try something when we agree to take a shot at it. If the chances of success are low, it is a long shot, but regardless of the difficulty or obstacles, we should stick to our guns and not be gunshy. If something is definite, it is a sure shot; if unfocused, it is scattershot. If I want to try out an idea, I’ll run it up the flag pole and see if it gets shot down. If we feel strongly, we’ll stick to our guns. We might take verbal pot shots at someone who annoys us, and if really annoyed, give them both barrels. He shot a glance at his rival and took a parting shot before leaving the room. If someone becomes psycho, they “go postal,” or “go ballistic.”

Gunspeak seems to be everywhere. A recent Tom Jones’s CD is “Reloaded, Greatest Hits” (National Public Radio December 1, 2003, Terry Gross interview). Perhaps I’ll shoot up to Target and buy a copy. The headline “5 Young Guns Who Nearly Took Memphis” is about an international bridge tournament, not an armed assault (Truscott 2001: A21). A young musician describes his home recording studio as bulletproof because it is easy to use. “Young guns shine at Hollywood premier” (*USA Today* August 31, 2000, p. 2D). Many a corporate hot shot became a big shot by rising through the ranks faster than a speeding bullet.

Decision-making or causal activity has become pulling the trigger: “They looked at four different stores before pulling the trigger and buying” (*NPR Morning Edition* December 5, 2003, on buying patterns over the Internet). In an article about whether or not Hillary

Clinton would run for president, "I didn't get the impression that she had pulled the trigger in her mind." "Genetics load the gun; the environment pulls the trigger" (*NPR Morning Edition* July 19, 2001). "Could sour markets trigger a recession?" (*USA Today* March 16, 2001, p. 17A). ". . . the Fear Room at Kerry campaign headquarters is on a hair trigger to turn any breaking news into a personal threat" according to William Safire (2004a: A27). A golf tournament commentator said, "He's playing too fast. He's pulling the trigger very quickly" (*Golf TV*, August 25, 2006).

Lawyers and detectives are always searching for a "smoking gun," a phrase which became popular during the Watergate hearings (Safire 2003: 18). Court TV's [www.thesmokinggun.com](http://www.thesmokinggun.com) brings you "exclusive documents" you won't find anywhere else.

Television shows may attract viewers with their combative natures as in CNN's *Crossfire*, MSNBC's *Firing Line* or AMC's *Shootout*, and William Buckley's *Firing Line* was on for thirty-three years, but I would rather watch the sitcom, *Just Shoot Me*. The title of the letters-to-the-editor page of the *New York Times*'s Circuits section is "Incoming." Among cars currently are the Chrysler *Crossfire* and the 2007 Dodge Caliber.

Some gunspeak has a particular history. When Andy Sipowicz on "NYPD Blue" said, "You just be keeping your powder dry," he was encouraging his partner to act cautiously and prudently, to be on the alert. He echoed Oliver Cromwell's centuries-old advice to his troops, as well as Margaret Mead's only book on American culture, *And Keep Your Powder Dry* (1942). Moving anything completely, lock, stock, and barrel, refers to the three basic parts of a rifle, and was used by Sir Walter Scott in 1817. Surprise registered as "son of a gun!" may derive from children registered as such who were conceived or born among the cannon of a sailing ship. When the Florida Gators arrived for a basketball game "locked and loaded," as a centuries-old rifle phrase puts it, they were ready to play, not drunk.

"A magic bullet for obesity? Sorry about that," apologized a *Newsweek* ad, drawing from German bacteriologist Paul Ehrlich's phrase for a precisely targeted syphilis medicine in 1910 and now a familiar usage describing a specific cure for any problem. A silver bullet was once thought to be the only effective defense against werewolves or other magical threat (Safire 2004b: 28). Now it means a quick solution to a difficult problem, as "Condoleezza Rice testified that there was no 'silver bullet' action that would have prevented the terrorist attacks" (*USA Today* April 9, 2004, p. 1A) or the "local leader came up with what they thought would be a silver bullet for the area's problems" (September 16, 2001, p. 25). But the two expressions are sometimes used interchangeably.

Gunspeak thrives in the hypercompetitive world of U.S. sports. Michael Jordan "set a great example for what his team," the Washington Wizards, renamed from the Washington Bullets, "[was] fighting for. He strapped it on. . . . He skipped the Wizards' shootaround" (*USA Today* March 6, 2003, p. 4C). Jordan said, "I told the guys that we have 28 games left, and I'm not going down with any bullets. I'm going all out. . . . I want to have fun" (*New York Times* February 23, 2003, p. 1SP). He proceeded to shoot the lights out. Pitcher Roger Clemens is now forty-two years old, and "he's still throwing bullets out there" (*New York Times* July 5, 2001, p. C10). And "AL West reloads for 2002" (*USA Today* March 27, 2002, p. 4C). "Mets try to turn season around minus big guns" (*New York Times* July 1, 2001, p. 3SP). From a football headline and article: "Shootout. Two quarterbacks winging passes as if they were gunslingers firing bullets at each other in dusty Dodge City" "Favre shoots himself in the foot in a showdown that fizzles" (*New York Times* January 21, 2002, p. D5). "The Raiders had some of

pro football's oldest gunslingers." NASCAR Winston Cup driver Joe Memechek was a "hired gun" for the race at Watkins Glen (*New York Times* July 1, 2001, p. 3SP).

Less expected is the diffusion of gunspeak to fishing. Although fishing with guns is legal in Vermont where "every spring, hunters break out their artillery—high caliber pistols, shotguns, even AK-47s—and head to the marshes to exercise their right to bear arms against fish" (Belluck 2004: A1), I never anticipated gunspeak applied to fishing when casting: "Hold your fire, remember, he can see that well. Get the fly right in front of his eyes when he is 30 feet out" (P. Kaminsky, *New York Times* February 23, 2003, p. 8SP, emphasis added).

Bullets are everywhere. "He asked me if I had any bullets in my tank" that is, whether I had any energy (*New York Times* October 19, 2004, p. 1SP). "PowerPoint has become a generic term for any bullet-ridden [riddled?] presentation" and "when [PowerPoint] bullets are flying, no one is safe" (Schwartz 2003: 12WK). The anti-missile defense system is described as a system to "hit a bullet with a bullet." Last winter, "the citrus crop dodged a bullet." Investors are always looking for "funds that can dodge tax bullets" (Braham 2001: 78). "This budget shoots with real bullets," asserted a Congressman on National Public Radio (April 25, 2001). But if a man is infertile or has a low sperm count, he is said to be shooting blanks.

The legacy of the imagined Wild West lives on in gunspeak. President Bush is known for his "gunslinger's stance" and portrayed as a gunslinger, especially in foreign media such as the cover of *Der Spiegel* on March 1, 2004. Gunslinger-faced Lance Armstrong won the Tour de France again on his gun-metal gray bicycle, but he had to sweat bullets to do it. Compaq computer ads echo gunfighter sentiments: "Fastest PC deployment ever. . . . Wanna see it again?" A popular lottery game is called "Quick Draw." Stagecoaches are long gone, yet we refer to sitting in the front passenger seat as riding shotgun, or as one student said, "shottie." Continental Airlines used this as, "Sit up front. Without calling 'shotgun,'" in one of its ads (*New York Times* August 2003). The gunfighters we hear about now do not shoot up Old West movie sets; they're gunning for someone in a drive-by looking to ice someone with their heat. Other bad guys shoot up drugs. "Bush and Rumsfeld may have to holster guns," according to one headline (*New York Times* June 3, 2001, p. 20). When Canon advertises "Shoot first. Edit later," it is playing on stereotypical constructions from the Old West (*New York Times* May 31, 2001, p. D5). Or it may be used in association with historic individuals. Extended StayAmerica uses Annie Oakley in its advertising series of "Famous Road Warriors" quoting her, "I only wanted a hotel room. I wasn't planning to shoot the whole budget," adding, "Aiming for a comfortable hotel at an affordable price? Bulls-eye!" (*USA Today*, September 27, 2000, p. 12A).

Gunspeak may work by implication when it draws on famous film scenes. "Go ahead, make my day," said Clint Eastwood as huge-pistol-wielding detective Dirty Harry Callahan in *Sudden Impact* (1983). This shows up in ads for Father's Day, "Go ahead, make Dad's day," and for Mother's Day as well, "Go Ahead, Make My Day" in magazine ads from FTD.com (*Time*, May 15, 2000: 101), and in a cellular phone ad, "The free phone will make your day. Make their day" (*Washington Post*, August 27, 2000, p. A3).

When President Bush tells terrorists, "You can run, but you can't hide," he implies they are being hunted like prey. Arnold Schwarzneger's killer phrase, "Hasta la vista, baby" from *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* can show up anywhere, as when I heard it said in mock imitation of the actor while three boys buried a dead bird. Many boys remember his line, "Consider that a divorce," when he shoots his wife in *Total Recall*, and recall Bruce

Willis's lines, "Thanks for the advice" and "Happy trails, Hans," while he kills terrorists in *Die Hard*. Dick Cheney after a shooting accident appeared on a *Time* cover described as "sticking to his guns" (February 27, 2006).

*Top Gun*, the top grossing film of 1986, amplified that title phrase so powerfully that it was applied to President Bush on a *Newsweek* cover (November 18, 2002). *Motor Trend* used the expression for a cover story about "America vs the World" (August 1993), as did *Sports Illustrated* for a story on Peyton Manning (December 20, 2004). During his 2004 campaign, President Bush used the music from *Top Gun* at his campaign rallies (*New York Times* October 25, 2004, p. 24), conspicuously continuing his association with the popular film.

The brutal political scene in 2000 provided ample gunspeak. Four years ago, Mr. Cheney took "dead aim at Gore" and on a *Newsweek* cover Bush and Cheney, "The Avengers" were "Taking Aim at the Age of Clinton" (August 07, 2000). After the election was over, it was widely reported that "Mr. Gore took a bullet for the country" (Friedman 2000: A29). It was a war out there then too.

Guns lurk in our gestures as well as our words, as parents of boys know well. The single-handed, index finger-gun gesture frequently used toward other cars while traveling and in play has become more complex. Now boys use both arms and hands, pretending to chamber a round in a rifle and aim it, often with sound effects; if they are "shooting" a finger pistol, they use both hands to steady it, as they have seen in police dramas. In 2001, two New Jersey kindergartners were suspended for pointing their finger guns at each other. Adults use the gestures too. After scoring a direct conversational hit, someone might pretend to blow smoke from the barrel of an index finger, or having made a foolish statement, might hold a finger gun to his head in mock suicide.

So embedded is gun culture that my son's keyboard offers "gunshots" as one of the instrumental modes of choice. He can play "Ode to Joy" or "Jingle Bells" completely with gunshot sounds. In the popular adolescent world of PaintBall, however, an interesting reversal has taken place. The fierce weapons used to shoot paint globules are called "markers," not pistols or guns, and they can therefore be sold over the Internet.

## Conclusion

Does gunspeak matter? That is, does our abundance of gun-related and derived expressions make us more prone to act violently or less sensitively? Or said otherwise, if cultural patterns influence language, does language in turn affect behavior, or the culture itself? Is there a feedback loop? No matter how tempting or likely, I cannot demonstrate that a consistent feedback circuit exists.

At the very least, however, I would argue that not only does gunspeak reflect our societal obsession with firearms but it couples easily and unconsciously with our violent entertainments to create a world in which we remain primed to be aggressive, and combative, in which we are ready to fight, in which we can be readily mobilized to strike any perceived enemy if necessary, be it on the playing field, in the boardroom, or overseas.

Who uses gunspeak? We all do. I detect little difference between the anthropological observer and the "native." There may be a male preference for gunspeak, in the same way that violence appears occasionally in young boys' speech, but never in girls' speech

(Tannen 1994: 99), but I do not have systematic data for such a claim. Are there class differences in gunspeak? The readership (and writership) of *USA Today* and *The New York Times* may differ, but there is no difference in the frequency of gunspeak terms in these papers, nor is it less common on National Public Radio. Gunspeak exists in popular or mass culture, as well as in high(er) or “non-popular” culture (Traube 1996: 133).

Gunspeak did not emerge suddenly after 9/11. It has been here for years, decades in many cases, centuries in some. Perhaps it has increased during the twentieth century, but it has been around, priming us in subtle ways.

Gunspeak is generalized throughout the language. As such it becomes an unself-conscious complement to violent non-gunspeak language which also laces our speech, whether when we say we “bombed” a test, or in our “culture wars,” political “wars of words,” our wars on terror, cancer, drugs, or ideas (Friedman 2005: WK17), in the speech of adolescent boys (and college students) as they endlessly play video games, shouting, “Die. Die. I killed you,” or in discussion of “battleground” states and the “voter-drive ground war” (*New York Times* October 20, 2004, p. A1) in the fall 2004 election.<sup>1</sup>

Gunspeak (and warspeak, at which I have fired only a volley) is reminiscent of Toni Morrison’s passionate view of violent language expressed in her Nobel acceptance speech:

The systematic looting of language can be recognized by the tendency of its users to forgo its nuanced, complex, mid-wifery properties, replacing them with menace and subjugation. Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge. (1994: 15–16)

Gunspeak is thus a “fashion of speaking” supporting Whorf’s assertion that “there are connections but not correlations or diagnostic correspondences between cultural norms and linguistic patterns” (Whorf 1941: 93). Hoijer might as well have had gunspeak in mind when he described “a functional interrelationship between socially patterned habits of speaking and thinking and other socially patterned habits” (1964: 148).

Catching up on a newspaper I had a gunspeak moment when I read the headline, “An Itchy Trigger Finger Draws Lethal Return Fire” (Byrne 2002: 41), but the article was about a chess match. Last week, a publisher’s representative finished talking to me and “holstered” the stylus of her ThinkPad. In Steve Martin’s appreciation of Johnny Carson, he wrote, “You enjoyed the unflappable grannies who knitted log-cabin quilts, as well as the Vegas pros who machine-gunned the audience into hysterical fits” (2005: A23). At one of my son’s Little League games I snapped awake fearing the worst when I heard the coach shouting to the batter, “Pull the trigger, Sam! Pull the trigger!” But he was only urging a cautious child to swing the bat, not to shoot anyone.

Frankly, all this gunspeak just blows me away. If cartoonist Walt Kelly had been an anthropologist examining U.S. culture, he might have had Pogo say, “We have met the Exotic Other, and they are us.”

### ***Questions for Further Discussion***

1. Can you identify and bring to class additional examples of “gunspeak”?
2. Argue the position that “gunspeak” is simply a reflection of something very common in U.S. society, guns, and nothing more.