

Eco-Politics and the English Language: From 1984 to 2004

By ACSH Staff — March 22, 2004

Walk into any food store. Unless it is a market that carries only ocean fish or meat harvested from wild animals, the food that it sells is a product of domestication and modification by humans. In any supermarket, we find a bewildering variety of foodstuffs that bear only the slightest resemblance to the wild progenitors from which they were once derived. The ancestors of many of our everyday foodstuffs are known to us only because of twentieth-century developments in the science of genetics, which allowed us to identify the wild plants from which they were derived. It is now understood, for instance, that two interspecies crosses led to our modern bread-wheat.

Though what we see in the store is the plant's phenotype (the fashion in which its genetic makeup is expressed), you do not have to be a molecular geneticist to understand that what you are seeing is ultimately the product of the plant's genome (its raw genetic content) and that the difference between the current domesticated variety and its wild ancestor is a result of the transformation of its genome. Dare we say it? All the foods that we eat with the noted exception of caught fish and game are products of genetic modification in the fullest sense of that term. True, some of the crosses, such as those that produced bread-wheat, likely occurred "naturally" rather than through human intervention, but in virtually all other cases, humans were actively involved in the genomic transformation, making "genetic modification" a characteristic of most everything that we eat.

"Genetically-modified" sounds passive, but it refers to a long history of active human intervention in the life of domesticated plants and animals. Genetics, after all, is not just the replication of genomes but the modification of the genome from generation to generation.

The Green Lexicon

All of this is a circuitous way of making a point about the role of activist ideologues in seeking to control language and, through it, what we think and how we act. In an upcoming piece on "The New Green Science," I talk about the lexicon of Greens and how that lexicon is intended to make us subservient to their worldview.

With the sprouting of signs labeling products as "g.m.-free" (g.m. for genetically modified) in "organic" food stores and now even in conventional food stores, one has to marvel at the Orwellian use of language. It's more like something out of *_Animal Farm_* than something from a farm. Agriculture has advanced as farmers selected seeds or vegetable cuttings that had different characteristics which could be understood as mutations or modifications of the genome that produced desired outcomes. Farmers selectively bred and crossed different plants or animals more genetic modification. Beginning in the 1920s, plant breeders began to accelerate the process of mutation by using radiation and/or mutating chemicals (some of which, incidentally, would be

carcinogenic for humans in large doses). Among other things, these techniques have allowed for the crossing of species such as wheat and rye to produce triticale.

To say that these techniques are scrambling the genome would be an understatement. Since the late 1930s, we have been able to keep individual cells alive in a cultured medium, which has led to a variety of techniques such as embryo rescue (from interspecies crosses that would have been aborted), tissue culture, and protoplasmic cell fusion in which the cell membranes are removed and the cells are fused together. Once again, that was more scrambling and mixing of genomes, which by any reasonable use of language would be genetic modification.

The Meaningless and Pointless "Organic" Label

It is estimated that at least 70% of the produce in the supermarket is a product of these various heroic forms of genetic modification. In "organic" stores, it is likely to be even larger, since the efforts to reduce pesticide use or use only the "all-natural" kind requires the development of plant varieties more resistant to insects and disease. So "g.m.-free" food has about as much meaning as "DNA-free" food or "chemical-free" food. It is, in short, a fraud.

In the new Green lexicon, "g.m." is used to refer exclusively to transgenics techniques the careful insertion of one gene, a promoter, and a marker and not to all other, older techniques that mix thousands of genes together. So much for the presumed "consumer's right to know." In fact, for the "anti-g.m. activists," it is consumer ignorance of these other breeding techniques that has allowed activists to wage their scare campaign against transgenics. Consumer "ignorance" might be too strong a term; consumer misinformation might be more to the point.

One can hardly fault the consumer for not knowing about how plants are bred or the underlying genomic issues involved. However, we can fault the activists who perpetuate this misinformation. How many of us know of what our pharmaceuticals are composed, let alone how they are created, or how our computers are made or other details about the creation and use of so many of the items of our daily life? Time permitting, we can become knowledgeable about one or more items outside our professional interests, but there are far too many for us to be even minimally knowledgeable about all of them. We therefore have various forms of mandatory labeling to help us to obtain some minimally necessary information to guide our purchases and usage. No one can fault reasonable information labeling.

So those who promote the totally fraudulent "g.m.-free" labeling are now using the slogan of the "consumer's right to know" in an attempt to compound their fraud by having mandatory "genetically modified" labels on products that, in context, are really the least "genetically modified" of any produce offered for sale. This is consumer fraud of the most blatant kind and should be vigorously opposed. We might wish to counter this fraud by demanding, possibly tongue-in-cheek, that the "g.m.-free" label be banned as a form of false advertising. Consumers have a right to know, right?

Thomas DeGregori, Ph.D., is a professor of economics at the University of Houston, member of the Board of Directors of the American Council on Science and Health, and author of [Bountiful Harvest: Technology, Food Safety, and the Environment](#) ^[1] (Cato Institute) and [Origins of the Organic Agriculture Debate](#) ^[2] (Blackwell Professional).

Source URL: <https://www.acsh.org/news/2004/03/22/eco-politics-and-the-english-language-from-1984-to-2004>

Links

[1] http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/1930865317/qid=1033757849/sr=8-2/ref=sr_8_2/102-1436433-9242547?v=glance&n=507846

[2] http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0813805139/qid=1079978137/sr=1-1/ref=sr_1_1/102-1436433-9242547?v=glance&s=books