

Words That Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear

Frank Luntz

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The nation's premier communications expert shares his wisdom on how the words we choose can change the course of business, of politics, and of life in this country In *Words That Work*, Luntz offers a behind-the-scenes look at how the tactical use of words and phrases affects what we buy, who we vote for, and even what we believe in. With chapters like "The Ten Rules of Successful Communication" and "The 21 Words and Phrases for the 21st Century," he examines how choosing the right words is essential. Nobody is in a better position to explain than Frank Luntz: He has used his knowledge of words to help more than two dozen Fortune 500 companies grow. Hell tell us why Rupert Murdoch's six-billion-dollar decision to buy DirectTV was smart because satellite was more cutting edge than "digital cable," and why pharmaceutical companies transitioned their message from "treatment" to "prevention" and "wellness." If you ever wanted to learn how to talk your way out of a traffic ticket or talk your way into a raise, this book's for you.

Words That Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear Details

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Patrick says

If you read this book, you also have to read "Don't Think of an Elephant" by George Lakoff immediately after you finish this book. The books are complimentary to each other, even though they were written by people from opposite political spectrums. Together, they make up what each book seems to lack.

This book was written by Luntz, who is an extreme right-winger and brags about how he helped Newt Gingrich grab power and how he bamboozled America into believing the "Contract for America" was a truthful, honest document. Except he doesn't use the word bamboozle. Instead, he explains how loosening restrictions on environmental laws should be called the "Keep America Clean" act and why giving more money to the rich should be called the "Job Creation Act." Essentially, he faithfully twists everything the Republicans do and renames them to say the opposite of what they do.

OK, there's my political rant. Now, if you can get beyond the politics, the fact is Luntz makes a very good point - Americans will react to the words they hear without thinking about what they mean. And Luntz will step you through it. For example, if you want to cut off all aid to the poorest of the poor, you don't say you that you are slashing Social Security, instead you say you are "ending entitlements." Because entitlements implies that someone thinks they deserve a benefit without earning it or needing it. So by calling Social Security an "entitlement," people automatically don't like it. On the other hand, if you want to get rid of all oversight of big banks and give corporations more tax breaks, you call it the "Investing in Main Street" act, because Americans will think this is aid to small mom and pop businesses.

Luntz does a really good job explaining the mechanics behind finding positive and negative word combinations, including a good analysis of commercials that seem to stick with us forever (i.e. Let your fingers to the walking) and why they stick with us. He really emphasizes simplicity, but also the reason why you need to keep in touch with modern trends, since that can make words that worked last year not work this year. He also has some very good examples of phrases that folks thought should work, but didn't, such as George Bush proclaiming to terrorists to "Bring it on!" That may have worked in the '50s, but not today.

Finally, the book ends with an analysis of words he thinks will work in the future. Unfortunately, here's where the book becomes really dated, as he makes predictions for huge wins and a further turn to the right of America, all of which has been pretty much negated in the past six years. Despite that, the book is definitely a must have for anyone in communication or public relations. Just try not to swallow your tongue when he tries to justify everything Republicans stand for.

Then read "Don't Think of an Elephant" to hear why Luntz is completely wrong in his beliefs, and to also get some really good look at the overall philosophy of propaganda.

Ken says

This is my second book by Luntz, and I have the same problem with this book as I did with, WHAT AMERICANS REALLY WANT...REALLY. Every issue has many different sides, and various ways of interpreting the controversy. Luntz could very well support the views of Slave Holders, or promote the

concepts of Freedom From Slavery. There does not seem to be A Moral Center to his work, and I don't think that it really matters to him. He is the man who changed "Inheritance Tax" to "Death Tax". He claims that he is only interested in clarity of speech, but I think that in this instance he very much makes it look as if the government is doing something downright immoral. And, this tax only applies to multimillionaires and billionaires, yet it sounds like it would apply to the common person. This is a time in our nation's history where the tax base is the lowest that it has been since the late 1950's, and we do not have the money to pay our debts and provide needed government services. And, I think that if you are against any kind of tax on huge fortunes being passed along in these hard economic times, I think you are extremely naive, or maybe just in the employ of rich and greedy Americans.

However, what Luntz has to say is extremely informative, and regardless about how I feel about his politics, he has definitely changed how I "see" almost any political or social statements.

I think that this book should be read all high school students. What this country needs desperately is a nation of 'Critical Thinkers', and I think that Dr. Luntz understands that as well.

Natasha Yong says

Every occasionally, I think about "words".

How often we belittle its influence, its reach and its power. How mere 'words' can induce so much emotions. How it's used to encourage, to build and to grow; or how it's used to criticise, to demean or devastate.

Dr. Frank Luntz, America's premier communications expert shares his wisdom on how the words we choose can change the course of business, of politics, and of life. Frank uses his knowledge of words to help more than two dozen Fortune 500 companies grow. So when you can't afford to hire his talent, reading his book; "Words That Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear" is next best thing to do.

Rules of Effective Language

1) Use small words

Use Acronyms. Simplify.

Think SMS.

2) Use short sentences

Be appropriate.

Small beats large. Short beats long. And plain beats complex.

3) Credibility

Be aware of expectations.

Say what you mean, mean what you say.

4) Consistency matters

Repetitions, Repetitions, Repetitions.

Find a good message and stick with it.

5) Surprise

Tell people something they do not know.

Shift the thought process.

6) Sound and texture matters

Use sound associated with the product.

Tap on the rhythm of the language.

Use catchy word phrases.

7) Speak with aspiration

Speak what people want to hear. Speak to their deepest fears, deepest hopes and greatest dreams.

Personalise and humanise the message to trigger an emotional remembrance.

People will forget what you say but they will never forget how you make them feel.

Make people identify, it's always about the "You".

8) Visualise

The most important word - "Imagine".

9) Ask a question

It's not what you say, but what you ask that creates an impact.

Questions make the reaction personal. A personalised communication is the best communication.

Rhetorical questions require responses and responses require interaction.

10) Provide context and reveal relevance

Apply knowledge and frame of reference. Simply because assumptions, education, ethnicity and generations' live experiences differs.

Relevance is what makes market research so critical.

See the world through the eyes of the audience.

11) Order of presentation matters

The presentation of A+B+C is not necessary the same as B+C+A

12) Gender Matters

Men and women uses different metaphor.

Use the language of everyday life.

Men respond better to scientific and factual scenarios while women to stories and antipodes.

13) Listening

How often we talk so much more.

Listening implies consideration and requires thought.

It means the listener is taking the question seriously with respect and value the opinion.

An example of how the above rules can be applied to a stump speech delivered by Hillary Clinton outlining the 'four big goals' she would have as president in September 2007. In it, she used the following language:

"Restore America's standing in the world."

"Rebuild America's middle class and the economy to support it."

"Reform our government."

"Reclaim the future for our children."

A more effective representation would have been:

"Reclaim America's standing in the world."

"Reclaim America for the middle class."

"Reclaim our government."

"Reclaim the future for our children."

Brief, consistent and aspirational. Reclaim is used because it implies that something has been wrongly taken away or even stolen. Reclaim gets the nervous system firing. It is rich and motivational. By changing just one word, the message morphs from something that's not very inspirational and, frankly, forgettable, into a memorable series of statements that builds in impact and pushes all the right emotional buttons. In fact, if people just remember the word 'Reclaim' and associate it with Hillary Clinton, it might have been a success. Think Obama - think 'Change'

In his book, words or phrases that work include: imagine, hassle-free, lifestyle, accountability, results, innovation, renew, revitalize, rejuvenate, restore, reinvent, efficient, investment, independent, all-American, prosperity, financial security & "a culture of..."

In the office, I like to use words like: strategy, objective, purpose, productivity, efficiency, management, dashboard, real-time, business intelligence, streamline, workflow, exceed. So corporate!

I am reminded to think, re-think, and then think some more about the words we use.

Johnny says

Have you ever tried to convince someone of something and had exactly the opposite effect? The thesis of Dr. Frank Luntz, consultant to presidents, political parties, causes, and corporations, in *Words That Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear* is that we tend to sabotage our communication with complexity, length, lack of dependability, inconsistency, and repetitiveness. See, I've already broken his command to keep it simple and brief. That probably undermines my credibility. The key words associated with Luntz' rules are: simplicity, brevity, credibility, consistency, novelty, sound, aspiration, visualization, questioning, and context (p. 28). Those last three terms refer to the ideas of "showing, not telling," "allowing one's audience to make up their own minds," and "framing the message to fit the circumstances you want to highlight."

Luntz, perhaps best known as the "choreographer" of the messaging for the "Contract with America," explains about nuances which enable one to follow Warren Beatty's twice-quoted counsel, "People forget what you say, but they remember how you make them feel." (p. 82) What's the difference between "security" and "peace of mind?" "Security" implies something to fear while "peace of mind" implies both serenity and security (p. 258). Is "ownership" or "opportunity" the best word for defining the ability to succeed? Apparently, "ownership" feels impossible to so many that feel excluded that "opportunity" is a better choice (pp. 208-9).

One of my favorite parts of the book (beyond the three appendices which contain political memos as varied as preparing for Gray Davis' recall in California to defending the indefensible, the Clinton impeachment proceeding) was the redefinition of Orwellian speech from the negative satire of 1984's so-called newspeak to the kind of wisdom that says that what is needed is to let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way around. (p. 51)

Perhaps, the best advice in the book was the counsel about "re-words and their power. Think about some:

restore, reinvent, renew, revive, rework, revitalize, and restore. “Re-“words have an uncanny ability to suggest innovation and new energy without losing something valued in the past. (pp. 250-1) Of course, anyone who has ever read one of my reviews will know that I have to work on the two first guidelines: 1) Use small words and 2) Use short sentences. Nevertheless, I learned a lot from this book.

Jean-Daniel Veer says

Comprehensive, but way too long for the message it's trying to convey.

Garrett Burnett says

Frank Luntz, excuse me, Dr. Frank Luntz came across as a pompous, arrogant idiot. I guess it was supposed to be a book on rhetoric. He includes some really weak bits about business, the history of the English language, and grammar that were cringe inducing. He is a pollster who works mainly with politicians. When he sticks with his strengths (opinion polls and dealings with politicians), the book is tolerable. As the one star I awarded indicates, for the most part it was not tolerable.

After a few chapters I considered quitting. Then I thought, "That's probably what Dr. Frank Luntz wants, and I won't give him the satisfaction." So I kept reading. It became a contest of endurance...how long could Dr. Frank Luntz wander with this awful book and how long could I keep reading it. After finishing the last page, I felt like I had won. But in many ways I lost. However, I feel better knowing that no one is as big a loser as Dr. Frank Luntz.

William says

Eye-opening!

Let's be clear, Frank Luntz is a tool, and he's personally responsible for Republican's misrepresenting their platforms by using the power of word choice. But if you can look at what he's been able to do, you have to admit, he's amazing. Totally unethical, amoral, and a certified bag of dicks, but wow, he's literally convinced dying people to vote against their own medicare, poor people to vote against their own incentive programs, and criminals to increase prison sentences.

Words that work shows the glaring gap between the educated and the average. People aren't clever, logical, rational, or willing to put in hours of research to inform themselves on what the facts actually are. People are busy, scared, and unwilling to do extra work like "understanding." Understanding is hard work, making a snap judgement based on their emotional reaction is incredibly easier. Regardless of how intolerably ignorant it may be, the reality of the world is that this is how the majority of people make their decisions.

If you want to change the world, first speak its language.

Amal Shoeib says

The author breaks down the infrastructural elements of a good speech as the following:

1) Simplicity: Use Small Words

“Avoid words that might force someone to reach for the dictionary... because most Americans won’t. They’ll just placidly let your real meaning sail over their heads or, even worse, misunderstand you. You can argue all you want about the dumbing down of America, but unless you speak the language of your intended audience, you won’t be heard by the people you want to reach.”

2) Brevity: Use Short Sentences

“Be as brief as possible... The most memorable political language is rarely longer than a sentence. “I Like Ike” was hardly a reason to vote for the man, but the simplicity of the slogan matched the candidate and the campaign.”

3) Credibility Is As Important As Philosophy

“People have to believe it to buy it. As Lincoln once said, you can’t fool all of the people all of the time. If your words lack sincerity, if they contradict accepted facts, circumstances, or perceptions, they will lack impact... The words you use become you — and you become the words you use.”

4) Consistency Matters:

“Too many politicians insist on new talking points on a daily basis, and companies are running too many different ad executions. By the time we begin to recognize and remember a particular message, it has already been changed... “The breakfast of champions” tagline for Wheaties was first launched back in 1935 and is still going today. Hallmark’s “When you care enough to send the very best” debuted in 1934, and “Say it with flowers” for FTD dates all the way back to 1917.”

5) Novelty: Offer Something New

“In plain English, words that work often involve a new definition of an old idea... What matters most is that the message brings a sense of discovery, a sort of “Wow, I never thought about it that way.”

6) Sound and Texture Matter

“The sounds and texture of the language should be just as memorable as the words themselves. A string of words that have the same first letter, the same sound, or the same syllabic cadence is more memorable than a random collection of sounds.”

7) Speak Aspirationally

Via Words That Work: It’s Not What You Say, It’s What People Hear:

“Messages need to say what people want to hear... The key to successful aspirational language for products or politics is to personalize and humanize the message to trigger an emotional remembrance.”

8) Visualize

Via Words That Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear:

"Paint a vivid picture. From M&M's "Melts in your mouth not in your hand" to Morton Salt's "When it rains, it pours," to NBC's "Must See TV," the slogans we remember for a lifetime almost always have a strong visual component, something we can see and almost feel."

9) Ask a Question

"Is it live, or is it Memorex?" "Where do you want to go today?" (Microsoft) "Can you hear me now?" (Verizon Wireless)... "Got Milk?" may be the most memorable print ad campaign of the past decade. The creator realized, whether intentionally or not, that it's sometimes not what you say but what you ask that really matters."

10) Provide Context and Explain Relevance

"You have to give people the "why" of a message before you tell them the "therefore" and the "so that."... if it doesn't matter to the intended audience, it won't be heard. With so many messages and so many communication vehicles competing for our attention, the target audience must see individual, personal meaning and value in your words."

such an interesting concise book!

Vince Wu says

For a book whose core message is effective language, I found "Words that Work" much too verbose and meandering for my liking. Some of the early chapters could be summed up quite easily in a few pages, especially as the ideas are borderline stating the obvious. I suggest reading chapter 1 "The Ten Rules of Effective Language" then skimming the rest unless you find an example particularly interesting.

It's quite clear though that Frank Luntz is an expert at the art of crafting and framing messages. His examples provide insight into how much work is involved behind the scenes to test and re-test until what people hear matches what you are saying (the description of how dial sessions work is worth exploring further). And it's remarkable how a lot of political messaging gets it wrong, and as a result doesn't convey what was intended to the average American.

Interesting examples of simple re-framing:

- Used Car -> Pre-owned Vehicle
 - Housewife -> Stay-at-home mom
 - Gambling -> Gaming
 - Spending -> Investing
 - Drilling for Oil -> Exploring for Energy
-

Gloria says

Okay, I have to put a big caveat on the rating. I really did like it because I learned *a ton*.

I don't agree with the guy or admire him, and I think he really twisted the notion of what George Orwell was trying to get at in his famous essay—a lot of what this book does is in fact flirting the very edges of Orwellian language as we know it in the negative sense.

But in reality, what he is saying is to take advantage of the fact that words are imprecise, that the word "blue" conjures up different shades of blue in every listeners' mind (my analogy)--and that it all needs context and reference to fully make it persuasive.

Biggest take-away, I think is to focus on the results not the process—and that aspirational speaking is most persuasive.

Definitely a great thing to pair with Lakoff's *Don't Think of an Elephant*—much more hands on, less cerebral and highly effective.

And I have started applying some of the things I learned already on a project I am working on.

Evelyn Puerto says

Frank Luntz's *Words that Work* is an engrossing read of words that do work, whether in politics, business or just everyday life. He doesn't just give his opinions. Rather, they are backed up with extensive focus group and other research.

Luntz summarizes his book in just one sentence: It's not what you say, but what you hear. Using case studies and examples, he demonstrates just how easy it is to think you are saying one thing but your audience hears another, and sets up 10 rules for effective communication.

Throughout the book, as he shares anecdotes of companies and politicians who communicated well (or not so well), he explains which of the rules were followed and which were broken. This made it very clear just how powerful the right words can be, and how deadly the wrong ones are.

Astounding to me were the examples from politics and commerce of people or companies who needed desperately to communicate with the public and either completely failed to do so, or used silence as their communication strategy. Luntz suggests other ways they could have shared their message, potentially avoiding the disaster that happened.

One chapter lists 21 words or phrases that will work in 21st century communications, with sometimes lengthy explanations why. It's interesting, just coming off the 2012 elections, to note the politicians who used these in their campaigns, and the ones who did not.

Some reviewers gave Words the Work a one star rating, largely because they took exception to Dr. Luntz's political views. Those ratings do not do justice to the research and analysis that went into the conclusions of the book. The political bent of the author is irrelevant to the worth of his findings.

I was interested in this book primarily as a writer (although I found the entire thing fascinating). Much of what I learned will be helpful as I write website copy, the copy for the back covers of my books, and any other advertising copy I'll need.

Overall, Words that Work is a useful read for anyone who uses words for a living and wants to harness their power effectively.

Brett says

Luntz is widely regarded as the patron saint of republican catch phrases, and here he supposedly offers to share his wisdom about the workings of effective language. For the person that has spent much time thinking about language (or has spent time just writing) I suspect that there isn't much here that is really going to blow your mind. Be direct; be repetitive; use simple language. Not bad advice, but not exactly a doctoral seminar either, from someone that very conspicuously displays the "Dr." in front of their name on the front cover.

All in all, this book is a decent "best practices" sort of guide, especially for those of us that do political work. Not sure how well these concepts transfer to the business world. Also, if you are a political lefty like me, be prepared to put up with a lot of b.s. when you read Luntz's actual work output, and occasionally in the body of the text itself.

Kenny Tang says

Easy to understand and a worthwhile read for anyone that communicates. It's not the most profound thing ever but it's amazing how many people fail to use these ideas in their communication. His 10 rules are the most worthwhile takeaway from this read. The book drags, lacks humor, and lacks gripping stories. In fact, I think the author makes exactly 1 joke in the entire book and I forgot all the stories already. The author is responsible for much of the language used in Republican political campaigns so as you read, you get bombarded with Republican/Conservative views but none the less, his points on effective use of language are still valid on any side of the isle. No need to run to the store and get it but if you have a little extra time and you're a Toastmaster, salesperson, marketer, politician, or anyone that communicates for a living, it's ammo for the fight.

Chris says

Decades ago I was sitting in my Sophomore High School English class and we had an unexpected visitor. A previous "English Sterling Scholar" for the school stopped by to visit with our teacher and he was asked to give us an impromptu presentation. He'd gone on to major in English and was currently doing an internship on a speech writing team for one of our state politicians in Washington D.C. I remember him saying that he had a lot of people telling him that his English degree would be useless and he should choose something else.

He told us that they were wrong and that there were plenty of job opportunities for people with English degrees. In fact, he suggested that a degree in English would be vital since more and more the future will have a dire need for people with the ability to write, read and understand language. He talked a bit about his experiences with political speech writing as well as opportunities to be professional writers for executives, colleges, research groups and others. I didn't have a great passion for politics so even though the speech writing thing sounded fun, I focused more on his points that an English degree had value. By that time I'd more or less decided I wanted to study English literature and writing but I had no idea what career might come of it. I definitely don't credit his entire impromptu speech as the impetus for my educational choices, but he did help me feel more confident in my plans.

I was given the book "Words That Work" as a gift by someone who knows my love of language and writing. Just glancing at the title I wasn't entirely sure what to expect from the book but I dove in, eager to find out. The author, Dr. Frank Luntz may well be one of the "end results" of the path started on by my visiting English Sterling Scholar mentioned above. Dr. Luntz has a passion for language and has taken that passion not only to Washington D.C. as a speech and campaign writer but also to numerous high profile corporations and non-profit groups. He stepped beyond the "simple" role of being "just" a speech writer and has taken on a role of helping a person shape their language into the best possible form for the desired message.

Much of the book includes anecdotes and references to real-world experiences that the author had with some politician, executive, or other highly visible individual. Truly he has had a star studded career having worked with US President's, Congressional/House Majority leaders, Fortune 100 Executives and Hollywood stars. Many of his stories were rather funny even if only for the unfortunate results of poorly structured language. I had a hard time relating directly to the many examples that were deeply entrenched in political or corporate dealings. still, the construction and results were intriguing.

The subtitle of the book "It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear" was the main focal point that Luntz returned to again and again. He presented a number of rules and bits of advice to help ensure your message is received in the way you intend. The first step, of course, is to make sure you are personally very clear on the desired message. After that, you need to very carefully and methodically analyze and choose words with special focus on your audience. Every listener comes with his or her own paradigms or prejudices which can taint certain words or cause even a seemingly simple and straightforward message to be misunderstood.

I really appreciated the analytic and in-depth way the author presented his ideas and backed them up with examples. The difficulty for me remains in how to take some of these higher concepts and their political/corporate examples and incorporate them into my own life in an effective way. Many of his examples include extensive studies with focus groups to examine and analyze reactions. A lot of his rules have to do with large scale speeches and presentations to large audiences such as a community council, corporate board members or even the entire nation.

As an individual non-political/executive person, many of the concepts are just too nebulous to easily translate into daily life. Fortunately, the last few chapters in the book include some examples meant for the "everyman" (or 'every-woman') such as how to talk with a police officer after being pulled over for speeding, how to schmooze your way past the concierge/greeter at a full restaurant, etc. Some of the examples and usage felt a little trite or at the very least unbalanced when compared with the examples throughout the rest of the book, but I was relieved that he at least made the effort.

He also included a section showcasing some of the most important words and phrases for the new century/decade/etc. In various sections of the book, some of his concepts felt a little dated. These "important words" sections felt even more dated than others. Some of the words he pointed out as being "new" have

already become so entrenched in our collective vocabulary that they feel old. Others already feel a little antiquated. This just serves to emphasize a point that Luntz makes in saying that language is changing more and more rapidly and we have to do our best to keep up with an ever changing lexicon. He talks about the generational changes as Baby Boomers are retiring and dying off while Generation-X, Generation-Y, Millennials and other groups are bringing their own patterns of speech and mindsets.

Overall, I found this to be an interesting read. At times it felt a little too academic or that the examples and suggestions were too distanced from me as an "everyman" reader. But I definitely appreciated and enjoyed reading about his concepts of how to frame your words with the audience in mind and the suggestion emphasized by the subtitle that your message may not always be as clear to others as it is to you.

3 out of 5 stars

Alan says

This is a deeply cynical book by an author who never tires of telling you he was the main genius behind the "Contract with America" that helped the Republicans win control of Congress in 1994.

He starts by quoting George Orwell bemoaning the misuse of language. He then proceeds to misuse language, and purports to teach the rest of us to do the same, for the rest of the book.

According to Doctor Luntz, who has no doubt tested every word in polls and focus groups, changing the name of an activity from gambling to gaming, transforms not just the image but the activity itself, from a destructive and risky behavior to good clean fun.

Doctor Luntz has probably also tested the fact that his books sell better if he always refers to himself as "Doctor." Never are we told what he is a doctor of and where and when he earned his doctorate.

How can a corporation smash a strike? Ask Doctor Luntz (Answer: by changing the language with which the corporation communicates. Not by addressing the workers' concerns (God forbid) or improving pay or work conditions but by subtly undermining the union.

How do corporations like Enron deal with scandals and avoid government oversight? Not by reforming themselves but by changing the words they use.

Doctor Lunz praises Ford for its successful communications strategy and use of the correct buzzwords while tearing down GM for failing to use them. However now both of them are stuck selling huge gas guzzlers that nobody wants to buy.

How does big oil justify its massive profits? With words like, "Working together -- consumers, government, industry -- we'll insure diverse, reliable energy to live our lives and keep America going strong."

Doctor Luntz says he deeply respects the American people but also goes to considerable lengths to argue that most Americans are uneducated, ignorant, do not read, are not happy and are still freaked out by 9/11.

Doctor Luntz never loses an opportunity to get in a sly dig at Democrats.

To conclude, let me quote from Orwell's "1984" because the following paragraph seems to me to perfectly capture the ethos of this nasty little book:

"Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought?... Has it ever occurred to your, Winston, that by the year 2050, at the very latest, not a single human being will be alive who could understand such a conversation as we are having now?... The whole climate of thought will be different. In fact, there will be no thought, as we understand it now. Orthodoxy means not thinking—not needing to think."
