The buck's parked here:  
*The discourse of corporate ‘irresponsibility’*

EARLY in 2003, Australians learnt of yet another case of boundless corporate greed. At the annual meeting of the Commonwealth Bank, it came to light that one of its retiring executives, a Mr Chris Cuffe, had received a payout of more than $30 million. The public's reaction was understandably one of outrage.

Alas, we are having to get used to these sorts of revelations from the corporate sector—and used also to such revelations being massaged very carefully in the stage-managed deliberations of the company annual meeting. On the evening of the Cuffe revelation, the chief executive of the bank, David Murray, chose to appear—to his credit—on the ABC’s 7.30 Report to defend the action. Host Kerry O'Brien began by acknowledging Murray's courage in appearing—'Thanks for fronting'; he said and then led off with a well-aimed blow: 'How many workers have you sacked in your ten years at the top of the Commonwealth Bank?'

In an interview like this, the general thrust of questioning is to get the interviewees to account for their actions—to get them to acknowledge what has been done and to explain and to try to justify it. And so virtually every question Kerry O'Brien put to Murray that night had the word 'you' in it linked to some imputed action: 'Is it true you paid Chris Cuffe $30 million?'; 'So eight or nine months ago, nearly, you paid out nearly $30 million, but you've just disclosed it today?'; 'Did you seek to reduce Cuffe's salary and bonuses in contracts you signed with him in 2000?'; 'You yourself took a bonus of $4.5 million last year?; 'Do you pay your regular employees for completing 10 years of service?'

The interview made for fascinating viewing. Here was a man needing to draw on all his skills of persuasion—and also obfuscation, it must be said—to defend what to most is indefensible. It was intriguing to see how he attempted this. In the transcript of interview, we can see the operation of a number of strategies at work, which I outline below. To the student of language these strategies have a certain academic interest. To the average citizen however, sadly they are just more dismal evidence of the ethical netherworld that corporate Australia seems increasingly to be operating in.

### Strategy #1

**Deny your own agency; refer to the agency of others**

The key to this strategy is to pass the buck. The term 'you' is ambiguous in English—having both a singular and plural referent. This imprecision is readily exploited by a powerful individual like Murray because there is always some institutional 'you' (a plural referent) that can be brought into the discussion. In the following exchange, O'Brien tries hard to make Murray the author of events, evoking a scene that has the chief executive writing the cheque for his retiring colleague. But Murray will have none of this; in his response he refers not to himself, but the actions of the bank's board.

O'BRIEN: Did you think about perhaps making the [disclosure of the payment] more transparent as you were writing a cheque for $30 million?

MURRAY: Well the board of the bank did examine this question at the appropriate time, and .... Murray refers to the board often in the interview. So when O'Brien asks Murray what he did, frequently the reply refers to what they did or what we did.

There is a variation on this type of deflection—this is where the important role of company chairman comes in. The chairman of any company board occupies mainly a figurehead position—he is not an initiator of company activity, but mainly a mouthpiece for it. But a harried chief executive can use this role to his advantage. In the following exchange, O'Brien won't allow Murray to exploit the 'you' ambiguity noted above. He refers to Murray as 'you yourself' and questions the ethics of the CE's payouts to himself.

O'BRIEN: You yourself took a bonus of $4.5 million last year. I think you called it a 10-year service payment. Was that a kind of long service leave equivalent?

MURRAY: Our chairman John Ralph explained this in detail to our last
HERE are many events in the world over which we exert little or no control—and we here includes even the chief executives of major banks. Instances of such events are natural phenomena like gravity, the weather, the tides etc. Thus, when we describe such things, the grammar we use acknowledges the lack of agency that is involved. So we say 'The object fell to earth', and not 'The object pulled itself down to earth'.

In human affairs by contrast, there is often a good deal of agency involved. Many things don't just happen; rather they are the result of the actions of individuals or groups of individuals. But sometimes it can be convenient to pretend that we're dealing, in fact, with ineluctable natural forces like gravity or the weather. In the world of the corporation and the major bank, the most profound of these 'natural forces' is the force of market competition.

Thus, when Kerry O'Brien takes Murray to task over the massive downsizing of staff implemented during his tenure as CE, Murray is quick to make it sound as though all this has happened in some unavoidable way—the result of some tide of change that everyone has had to endure together.

O'BRIEN: The union says [you sacked 17,000 workers in your ten years at the top of the Commonwealth Bank] Would that be about right?

MURRAY: Well it may be right but everybody knows the sort of changes we've gone through that have made the bank more competitive.

So the changes to which Murray refers are ones that 'we've gone through'—like a spell of bad weather—rather than changes that he and the bank have brought on. But unfortunately for Murray, the force of competition cannot be used to justify the main action under scrutiny here—the payment of $30 million to a single employee. This is because such a practice, by any reasonable assessment, is simply not competitive. Thus, other abstract forces need to be invoked. In defending the size of the payout to Cuffe, Murray refers to 'the way that contracts work', without mentioning of course that they work only in the way to which the signatories—the human agents—have agreed. And in defending his own receipt of the $4.5 million one-off payment, he refers to the abstract force of 'industry standards'—which amounts in reality to Murray and a whole lot of like-minded colleagues and mates insisting on the same stratospheric rates of pay.

But, again, there are limits to how much this strategy can be deployed. As mentioned, O'Brien's line of questioning had a single recurring theme—the reference to Murray himself—and what he did. Could Murray sit through an interview devoted to probing him and his actions and not utter the word 'I' once? No, this would not make a 'responsible' corporate citizen look good. This is where strategy #3 comes in.
ACCORDING to one grammatical theory\(^1\), verbs can be roughly divided into two types—verbs of action (the type we used to call ‘doing words’ at primary school) and verbs of reflection (thinking/feeling/saying words). Thus, in the sentence ‘I authorised the payment of $30 million’, the word ‘authorised’ is an action verb. And in the sentence ‘I can understand why this sum of money is incomprehensible to a lot of people’, the word ‘understand’ is a verb of reflection.

It’s not too difficult to work out with which type of verb Murray would want to associate himself. Interestingly, almost every ‘I’ reference used by him in the interview, in response to O’Brien’s ‘you’, comes with one of these verbs of reflection:

- *I think* there is scope to make [the disclosure of these payouts] more transparent.
- *I completely understand* that people would find this unable to be comprehended in terms of the payment.

In using such a strategy, Murray is able to cut himself into the action—as indeed he must—at strategic moments in the interview. But significantly, these are all actions for which he does not have to account—having reasonable opinions about transparency provisions, or expressing sympathy about the public’s lack of comprehension. On the latter point, at interview’s end, Murray makes one final effort to make the $30 million comprehensible to an uncomprehending public.

- As I indicated, [the payment] rolled up in terms of the calculations over a number of years. This strangely convoluted construction sees a marrying of strategy #3 and the previous strategy#2. Murray is there helping people to understand things; and the thing itself—the payment—is presented as an entity over which no-one can has any real control.

The payment was so large, because on its face it simply managed to somehow ‘roll itself up’.

Conclusion

MURRAY’S responses in the 7.30 Report interview can be characterised as a kind of discourse of ‘diminished responsibility’—one which seeks to make a very powerful member of society appear virtually powerless. As we have seen in the analysis above, there are several strands to the technique. One is to make out that one’s capacity for individual action is severely circumscribed—everything just happens, or else is done by others. Another part is to make out that if one is a free agent at all, it is a freedom only to have public-spirited attitudes and feelings—like any other citizen.

There is of course nothing exceptional about an individual under attack doing all he can to defend himself—including calling upon whatever rhetorical means are available to deflect the attack. This happens in all social domains and at all levels of society—in parliament, in the law courts, in the classroom, in families, when lovers quarrel. The problem with the corporate sector is that, in an increasingly deregulated environment, powerful individuals now have a vastly expanded latitude for action, as well as an increasing capacity to affect the lives of others—including, for example, to sack large sections of one’s workforce, and to grant largesse to one’s cronies. And as corporate behaviour becomes more and more ethically suspect, so the techniques for defending this behaviour—the science of spin—become more and more sophisticated. As citizens we need to be increasingly aware of these methods—and to be equipped to take on these corporate leaders—whose greed and cynicism seems nowadays to be almost without limits.

Update

And it just keeps getting worse. In May 2003 the Cuffe payout was trumped by that awarded to retiring BHP Chief Executive, Brian Gilbertson—calculated at $38 million. And Gilbertson’s spin on the matter—this time some noble thoughts: ‘Money does not bring me happiness, happiness comes from other things’. Like taking everyone for a ride!

Tim Moore works in the Language and Learning Unit at Monash University

FOOTNOTE
1. See the functional grammar of M.A.K. Halliday.