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The Discipline of Language

THERE IS MAGIC in words properly used, and to give them this magic is the purpose of discipline of language.

Some quite intelligent people have been lured into thinking that a concern for words is out of date. Others allow themselves to believe that to speak and write sloppily is somehow an emblem of the avant-garde.

The truth is that in no other time in history was it so important to use the right words in the right place in the right way to convey what we have in our minds. We need the proper use of language to impose form and character upon elements in life which have it in them to be rebellious and intractable.

A glance at our environment will show that our high standard of living, brought about by our mastery of science and technology, is menaced by the faulty use of signals between men, between ideologies and between nations. By misinterpreting signals (which is all that words are) we create disorder in human affairs.

Communication of ideas is an important human activity. When we invented writing we laid the foundation-stone of civilization. In the beginning the power of words must have seemed like sorcery, and we are compelled to admit that the miracles which verbal thinking have wrought justified the impression.

Words underlie our whole life, are the signs of our humanity, the tools of our business, the expressions of our affections, and the records of our progress. As Susanne Langer says in *Philosophy in a New Key*: "Between the clearest animal call of love or warning or anger, and a man's least, trivial word, there lies a whole day of creation — or, in modern phrase, a whole chapter of evolution."

This language has such transcendent importance that we must take pains with its use.

In business there is no inefficiency so serious as that which arises from poverty of language. The man who does not express himself meaningfully and clearly is a bungler, wasting his time and that of his associates.

The key word in all use of language is communication. Thoughts locked up in your own breast give no

profit or pleasure to others, but just as you must use the currency of the country in which you are travelling, so you need to use the right currency in words if you are going to bring your thoughts into circulation. Many centuries ago Paul the Apostle wrote in these cautionary terms to one of his churches: "Except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? . . . ye shall speak into the air."

Importance in business

The workmen engaged in building the Tower of Babel were craftsmen, skilled in their trades. Take away their tools: they will replace them. Take away their skills: they will learn anew. But take away their means of communication with one another and the building of the Tower has to be abandoned.

How serious the problem of communication is in business may be revealed in this sentence: your letter's only justification is the critical three minutes when it must stand, naked and unexcused, fighting the boredom and inattention of the reader.

The environment of your letter — up-to-date letter-head with embossed symbol, double weight paper, deckle edges — these do not amount to much. Sour notes in music do not become sweet because the musician is in white tie and black tails.

What counts is simply this: to say what you mean with precision and accuracy in plain language. A true definition of style is "proper words in proper places with the thoughts in proper order." A scrupulous writer will ask "What am I trying to say? Do these words express it?" A word does not serve well which does not excite in the reader the same idea which it stands for in the mind of the writer.

There is no easy way of choosing words. They must not be so general in meaning as to include thoughts not intended, nor so narrow as to eliminate thoughts that are intended. Let the meaning select the word.

A word is ambiguous when the reader is unable to choose decisively between alternative meanings, either of which would seem to fit the context.

A great deal of unclear writing results from the use of too many broad, general words, those having so many possible meanings that the precise thought is not clear. The more general the words are, the fainter is the picture; the more special they are, the brighter.

Socrates pointed the way toward clarity in the use of language when he demonstrated to his disciples that they would get nowhere in their dispute about justice unless they agreed upon clear definitions of the words they used. He made sure that they were talking about the same things.

If you look back over the past week's differences of opinion expressed in conferences, memos and letters, you will be surprised by the number of times you said, or someone else said: "Why didn't he say that in the first place?" That refrain is monotonous in business offices and workshops.

There is only one way to make sure of the communication of ideas: to demand that what is being said to you shall be said in terms understandable to you, and to discipline your own language so that it says what you want it to say.

If you are just beginning to write, make it your first rule to be plain. If nature means you to be a fancy writer, a composer of odes or a trail-blazing author like Joyce or Stein, she will force you to it, but whatever of worth you turn out even then will be based upon your developed skill with words.

Meantime, say what you have to say, or what you wish to say, in the simplest, most direct and the most exact words. Someone who has no better employment may pick holes in every third sentence of your composition, but you have written in such a way as to satisfy the common sense of those who read to find meaning.

The plain way of writing conceals great art. By avoiding pomposity, ambiguity and complexity you attain simplicity, which is the greatest cunning because it conveys your meaning into the mind of another straight away, without effort on his part. It carries with it, too, a feeling of sincerity and integrity, for who can be suspicious of the motives of a person who speaks plainly?

What words are

Words are the only currency in which we can exchange thought even with ourselves. It is through words, which are the names for things and actions, that we perceive the events of the world.

Because of this universal importance, we need to be as clear-cut as we can in their use. Inexactness to some degree is inevitable, because thought can never be precisely or adequately expressed in verbal symbols. Words are not like iron and wood, coal and water, things we see and touch. Words are merely indicators, but they are the only sensible signs we have, enabling us to describe things and think about them. In the darkness of night we talk about the sun, knowing that

the word "sun" presents a picture to our hearer; we write about the "sparkling ripples" caused by the stone we cast into a pool, knowing that our description presents a motion picture to our reader.

What we need to do is keep our thinking and speaking language under the discipline of meaning. We cannot shape ideas and develop an argument without choosing and ordering our words. Many people have far better ideas than anyone knows; their thoughts either beat about in their heads, finding no communication package in which to emerge, or they come out distorted and in fragments.

A big vocabulary

Knowledge of words is not burdensome. Words are pleasant companions, delighting in what they can do for you whether in earnest or in fun, in business or in love. The true dimension of your vocabulary is not, however, the number of words you can identify but the number of words you can use, each with its appropriate area of meaning.

With an adequate vocabulary you are equipped to express every shading of thought. Too often in the ordinary intercourse of life we let this wealth of words lie inert and unemployed. We work a limited number of words to death. We exist in voluntary word poverty. We do coarsely what might be done finely.

One road to language mastery is the study of synonyms, words that are similar yet not identical in meaning. Two words that seem to be the same may have very much in common, but also have something private and particular which they do not share with each other, some personality natural to the word or acquired by usage.

Everyone recognizes the difference between child and urchin, hand and fist, mis-statement and lie. There is an overtone of meaning which causes a mother to resent your calling her child "puny" instead of "delicate." People persist in confusing "instruction" with "education" when discussing our school system. The former is furnishing a child with knowledge and facts and information; the latter is a drawing forth from within, opening up fountains already in his mind rather than filling a cistern with water brought from some other source.

Study the different shades of meaning expressed by the synonyms of a general word like "said." When should you use "maintained"? Under what conditions would "claimed" be more appropriate? Look at the different effects produced in your mind by substitution of these and other words for "said" in this sentence: "He said (asserted, implied, assumed, insisted, suggested) that the police were doing a good job." And try the substitutes for "looked" in the sentence "John looked at Mary" . . . glared, gazed, leered, glanced.

We may use "arrogant," "presumptuous," and "insolent" almost interchangeably in loose talk, but when we examine them with care we find three distinct

thoughts: claiming the homage of others as his due; taking things to himself before acquiring any title to them; breaking the recognized standard of social behaviour. There is a world of difference between the meanings of misconduct, misbehaviour and delinquency, and between vice, error, fault, transgression, lapse and sin.

This discrimination may appear trifling to some and tiresome to others. The writer who wishes to think clearly and express his thoughts clearly — and is there anyone who will admit that he wishes to be a bungler in thought and speech? — will see its virtues.

New words

A man should revise his language habits from time to time in order to keep pace with life and custom. There are more things to think about and to communicate about every day.

It may seem wise to some pedants to say that the words of a century ago are the best words, but we cannot go through life using the language of the last century any more than we can get along with the language of Cicero. Imagine that superb orator standing before our Senate to explain a bill having to do with nuclear war-heads and the probes into space. The point is that if Cicero were alive today and had words for these things he would use them so as to make his meaning crystal clear.

Good writing demands more than the addition of words to our vocabulary and the breaking of slovenly habits. It requires interest in language that inspires us to seek the best instead of muddling our thoughts and our communications by using the second-rate just because it is handy.

Besides concerning ourselves with individual words, we need to be careful to use the proper sort of language fitting the occasion. If a lawyer talks over the bridge table as he does to a jury; if the electronics engineer uses his trade language to explain to his wife how to change a fuse; if a business man uses factory language in writing to a customer: these people are pretentious people, or people who are not interested in their purpose of communicating ideas.

Every business, every profession, every trade, and every sport has its jargon. Specialists acquire words and ways of saying things which are handy in their work, and this is quite natural and proper. Jargon has its place within the interested group, but use of it makes communication with outsiders difficult.

Wilful offences

Besides the imperfection that is naturally in language, and the obscurity and confusion that is so hard to be avoided in the use of words, there are several wilful offences and neglects which men are guilty of, whereby they render these communication signs less clear and distinct in their meaning than naturally they

need to be. Politicians, particularly, should pay attention to the niceties of language so as to address us meaningfully.

The deformation of meaning for political ends has become a common practice. Every cautious reader has to pick his way carefully through a sea of adjectives which qualify and change words of which he knows the accepted meaning. The political interchanges in newspapers and in *Hansard* contain words which are obscure and undetermined in their meaning. Skill in disputing is not the same as skill in communicating.

A man is specific when he walks into a store and asks for a tube for his radio, television set or movie projector. He says: "PAT 1673", or whatever the number may be. It is evident that when we learn to talk about social matters the way we talk about electronic tubes we shall begin to manage our political and moral affairs as efficiently as we now deal with technical matters.

Our language has become a tired and inefficient thing in the hands of journalists and advertising writers. Their abuses and misuses are not the slapdash errors of unlettered hacks, but the carefully conceived creations of educated men and women. Their distortions are conscious devices, gimmicks to catch attention.

E. B. White, the distinguished essayist, wrote of Madison Avenue language: "With its deliberate inflections of grammatical rules and its crossbreeding of the parts of speech, it profoundly influences the tongues and pens of children and adults . . . it is the language of mutilation."

A survey of words used in national magazine advertisements was made a few years ago. The most frequently-used words were what are called the "floating comparisons" — words which are meaningless without points of comparison. Samples are: "new", whatever the reader imagines that to mean; "more, faster, longer lasting" without stating "than" something; "easy, wonderful, famous, magical, gentle," and the so-called "proofs" like "tests prove, doctors recommend."

In newspaper headlines the short words, not the correct words, are sought. They reduce "treaty" to "pact" and also refer to contracts, agreements, conventions, covenants, armistices, pledges, and truces as "pacts." They make any attempt or offer a "bid" and every superintendent, admiral, governor, manager, director and gang leader a "chief." A proclamation or enactment is an "edict." Every thief, robber, embezzler, swindler, housebreaker and pilferer is a "bandit." Such looseness is not the soul of wit but it is the death of meaning.

A pomp of words

Grace and style — the pomp of words — do not make a letter or an article wise, and yet the conviction

that profundity of thought is evidenced by complexity of language is astonishingly widespread. This advice is quoted jocularly in *So You Have To Make a Speech* by Daniel R. Maué: "When you don't know what you mean, use big words — that often fools little people."

Some writers, more interested in words than in ideas, fall in love with a word and make excuses to use it. They have even been known to make lists of pompous words to which they refer when dictating letters, imagining that they are thereby impressing readers. More than two centuries ago the Commissioner of Excise in England wrote to one of these searchers for novelty: "I am ordered to acquaint you that if you hereafter continue that affected and schoolboy way of writing, and to murder the language in such a manner, you will be discharged for a fool."

To help us to discipline our language we have devised semantics and syntax. The first is defined as "the science of the meaning of words," and the second is concerned with the manner of putting words together properly.

To make even a small venture into these branches of knowledge is to gain a lesson in humility and patience, and new ideas about the use of words to communicate the thoughts we have. The brave new science of General Semantics, still in its swaddling clothes (its textbook, *Science and Sanity*, was written by Alfred Korzybski in 1933) already has many interesting results to show. Its enthusiastic followers are actively exploring its implications for logic, aesthetics, education, psychiatry and other subjects.

The needs of the day

A youth may fail in mathematics or economics, which means only that he is deficient in those subjects, but if he fails in language he is fundamentally uneducated.

Yet the current passion for pictures and sounds, and the growing aversion to reading, have produced a generation of students who are finding it difficult to speak and write with sufficient accuracy to meet modern job requirements.

Afraid of loading children with too much learning, the fourth grade teacher in the United States uses a primer with some 1,800 words. A Russian child has a primer of 2,000 words in the first grade and of 10,000 words in the fourth. He is, moreover, reading Tolstoy in the first grade while his opposite number in the United States is working his way through a book entitled "A Funny Sled." This charge is made in an article in *Horizon* of July 1963.

Add to that the fact of multiple-choice examination papers which toady to our natural desire to avoid work. All the pupil need do is put an "X" in the appropriate square. He avoids all intellectual effort involved in marshalling his thoughts and expressing them coherently.

Some teachers go so far as to deny any standards of "right" or "wrong" in the few essays they give their pupils. They put this anarchical philosophy into the phrase: "Correctness rests upon usage." They are followers of the Humpty Dumpty school: "When I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean."

We are in danger of falling into the terrible plight of having a high technology unsupported by people who can discuss it or operate it understandingly — a sophisticated savagery.

Language goes deeper than technical literacy. It is not only being able to read newspapers. It has to do with forming us as human beings, with the qualities of civilization. Without discipline, language declines into flabby permissiveness, into formlessness and mindlessness. It deteriorates into what the late James Thurber called "Our oral culture of pure babble."

What is the remedy?

To be a good writer a person must spend much of his time at a table in the toilsome act of writing. You cannot develop a word sense haphazardly any more than you can pick up by casual or chance acquaintance the facts in physics and chemistry and mathematics needed in today's manufacturing.

After writing thoughtfully and correcting critically, you still need to read what you have written to ascertain that it is free from ambiguity, that the message is right, the words right, and the tune right.

Next to practice in writing, a writer needs bountiful exercise in reading. Language comes to us enriched by the insight, imagination and experience of generations before us. We need to see how acknowledged masters used words. The more you immerse yourself in the work of great writers of good language, the broader and more accurate your vocabulary will become and the more vigorous your style.

Today's life is passing by, and some are trying with a pen or a typewriter to put a bit of it on paper. The great tragedy of many people is that their vision is sublime while the means of expressing it escapes them. We need not be of that sort. By putting forth a little directed effort in study we may learn to tell our thoughts and ideas with dexterity.

Writing is not yet like an automated factory. It is still in the handicraft stage. People have to do it themselves. It is wretched taste for them to be satisfied with the commonplace when the excellent lies at their hand.

The power of words rightly chosen is very great, whether those words are used to inform, to entertain, or to defend a way of life. Confucius summed up the need for right choice when he said: "If language is not correct, then what is said is not what is meant; if what is said is not what is meant, then what ought to be done remains undone" and as a consequence morals, art, justice and the business of life deteriorate, and "the people will stand about in helpless confusion."