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On Saying What You Mean

ANY PERSON can, at any time in his life, increase his skill in saying what he means.

This is an age which seems to revolve around the communication of ideas, a time in which one of the greatest assets in business, politics and social life is the ability to express ideas clearly and concisely.

When we think of it, can we conjure up any prospect more appealing to common sense, to social sense, to moral sense, than this: that we should be engaged in forming exact ideas and in expressing them clearly in language?

It is not an ability easily come by. It requires attention and thought, but it is richly rewarding.

There are four questions which will help to make clear the general problem of communication of ideas. If we apply them to specific cases in everyday life we shall find that we can make our thoughts known clearly so as to persuade people to see events and ideas from our point of view.

What is it we wish to communicate? (We must have it clear in our own minds.)

To whom? (It is childish to try to score a bull's-eye by aiming in the general direction of the target.)

What is the best medium of communication? (Writing, word of mouth, photographs, movies, or what?)

What sort of words will best carry our message to this audience through this medium?

Because of the breadth of the subject, this *Monthly Letter* must limit itself to the communication of ideas by means of words. What is to be said here holds good for both spoken and written language, although writing will be more often mentioned.

Art in words

An artist in words seeks lucidity and melody. If what he says is not clearly understood as he means it, then it were better he had not spoken. If he uses cloudy language and harsh construction he loses not only the aesthetic enjoyment he might have had in writing but

he repels his audience.

If any one doubts the difficulty in communication of ideas by words, let him attempt to teach, without active demonstration, his son how to knot his tie.

His perplexity is not caused by rules of grammar or syntax. Many who write well would be hard-pressed to justify by a rule their use of this or that expression or of this or that sentence construction. Clearness of thinking, the skill that may be gained in analysing the thought that is to be conveyed, the ability to choose the right words: these lie at the base of communication of ideas.

They are qualities needed no matter what language is used. People of all tongues take joy in speaking and in hearing perfect speech. The same principles of thinking apply whether we use perfect French or perfect English.

Thinking itself needs words. Only by throwing our nebulous notions into some sort of understandable language within our minds can we avoid sloppy thinking. Words are the only currency in which we can exchange thoughts even with ourselves.

The beginning, then, of communication of ideas is words. Our thoughts provide us with the words in which to express them, but words also affect our thoughts and help to create and condition our bias in whatever we are thinking of communicating.

Words are not things in themselves, but merely the names we give things and actions. Our ability to express ideas depends greatly upon the stock of words we have built up through exercise of our senses of sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell. If we have kept these alive, registering impressions and facts gained through personal experience, then we have contributed to our ability to do a good job of conveying our messages to other people. Only when we use words as symbols of things known to us and to them can we say effectively and significantly what we ache to say. The theme of a poem or of a business letter, of a speech before an august audience or of an anecdote at the bridge table, may well have arisen from a single experience, but the images which provide the words in which we tell it will usually be drawn from a much

wider field, perhaps the total life experience of the writer or speaker.

Have a purpose

It is, of course, wiser to have something worth saying than to talk or write "off the top" for the mere sake of making conversation. So much has been advertised about the value of public speaking as a way of developing personality, building confidence, and all the rest, that the pertinent fact relevant to speaking is sometimes lost sight of: has the speaker something to say? has the writer something to write about?

Without a purpose, our words, are empty sound. Insincerity cuts the heart out of writing and speaking. We may marshal our arguments and concoct our pretty devices of words, but if we do not believe in what we say and in the need for saying it, we are only play-actors.

We frequently comment about some statement that it is an "inspired saying" — like Churchill's war-time speeches, or the Psalms of David, or Dr. W. E. McNeill's lecture on *The King's English* when he was Chancellor of Queen's University. We call them "inspired" because they sound like it. These people, like the Greeks, detested exaggeration and had no taste for embroidery. They were in earnest. They knew what they wanted to say, and they took pains to say it sincerely, accurately and vividly, in such a way as to appeal to the persons they desired to reach.

Eloquence in speaking or writing consists in this: the author of it makes an attempt to adapt the argument to the receptive system of the audience. By our clear thinking and our good choice of words, we help our audience to avoid confusion. By the structure of our composition we guard our audience against mistaking the incidental for the fundamental. We fit our language to our audience, restraining our natural bent at times so as not to be too flowery, and at other times garnishing the wonted plainness of our diction to suit an occasion.

Gracefulness is needed as well as logic. We must please before we can instruct. The speaker or writer has to overcome the friction of pre-occupation, disinterest and lack of knowledge.

If what we have written fails to transmit our ideas accurately — nay, even if the reader merely pauses in his reading to decide what interpretation he shall give a phrase of ours — we have failed in the operation of communicating.

One reason for failure of letters to convey to the reader what is in the writer's mind is that we do not take the trouble to imagine the reader sitting across the desk while we are dictating or writing. If he were there — or if we imagined him there — we would write what we have to say straightforwardly, easily, and without effort or affectation. "Being ourselves" is much more important than erudition in the communication of ideas.

Putting pictures into words

Churchill's comment in his book *Triumph and*

Tragedy is wise: "It is a mistake to try to write out on little pieces of paper what the vast emotions of an outraged and quivering world will be either immediately after the struggle is over or when the inevitable cold fit follows the hot." But it would be spineless indeed if we were to refrain from all expression of thought because we could not make it complete, final, and perfect.

By using with wisdom the knowledge we have, and being watchful to choose the right words, we can proceed a long way upon the road of recording experiences, telling our judgments about them, and forecasting what our intelligence leads us to believe will grow out of them.

Every word was at first a stroke of genius. It was a sound by which one person conveyed to another an idea of something not present to sight. By-and-by words achieved new distinction, because they became adapted to the picturing not only of absent things but of the circumstances, physical and social and sentimental and psychological, surrounding them. Still later, words were thrown into forms which had beauty as well as utility.

Only part of our enjoyment of a verse of poetry or a passage of prose arises from the knowledge it gives of a situation. Much comes from the beauty of the words as a pattern of sound and rhythm. Herein lies one of the secrets of successful communication of ideas: beauty in a communication made to us inclines us emotionally to receive it kindly. Not all the rhetoricians of twenty centuries have improved the terseness and soundness of Paul's advice to the Colossians, referred to admiringly by Dr. McNeill: "Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt."

Any truth, a business truth or a scientific truth or a philosophical truth, may be nakedly expressed so as to vex us by its difficulty, its obscurity or its harshness. Any truth may, without destroying its accuracy and clearness, be made to appeal to our sensitivity by expressing it in words of harmony and liveliness.

Writers seeking the best are careful to have their words get close to their thoughts. Their words, as Dr. Trench says in his treatise *On the Study of Words*, "will not be too big here, hanging like a giant's robe on the limbs of a dwarf; nor too small there, as a boy's garments into which the man has painfully and ridiculously thrust himself."

Poetry in prose

Prose is one of the high achievements of civilization, and the most lofty sort of prose would deal with the greatest things quietly and justly. It has no language that is distinctive from that of poetry, but the user of prose (even in the common affairs of everyday life) has much to learn from poetry.

Poetry can convey the same facts as prose, plus feelings. It breaks up the genteel patterns of life, and finds words and phrases that make things written

about come to life in the minds of readers.

Prose can embody all the necessary qualities of poetry. Some writers, notably John Ruskin, have been masters of a medium between prose and poetry. Churchill's prose, spoken or written, has harmony and rhythm. These men arranged their well-chosen words to flow in agreeable succession.

To write that sort of prose, attractive and powerful, is a priceless advantage in business, politics, philosophy, science, and every other realm wherein the work and thought of human beings demand the exchange of ideas.

Words are not things in themselves, immutable and invariable in their properties like the chemical elements. They are changeable and lively, deriving force from very trifling changes of position, and taking colour, chameleon-like, from the words which precede and succeed them, and being heightened or lowered in their significance by the powers of melody and inflection.

Coleridge, who defined poetry as "the best words in the best order", went on to say that in first-rate writing there is a reason not only for every word but for the position of every word. In reading a well-ordered sentence the reader will receive no jolt or check. He will, in today's language, take off, find the target, complete the flight, and land.

The writer is the person in the control tower, who has the whole situation visualized before him. If he can look upon what he is writing as if he were to be the person receiving it, he should discover what is fitting to be said, find the words in which best to say it, and discover any unseemliness of either matter or form.

Urbanity of style does not necessarily grow out of verbal agility. To write well, even to write clearly; to use words so true and simple that they oppose no obstacle to the flow of thought and feeling from mind to mind; these are virtues rooted in something deeper than word acrobatics. Once the reader recognizes a piece of writing as an ingenuity, the author's purpose suffers defeat or at least meets a formidable obstacle. An obvious striving after "style" is ridiculous.

Once again — as in so many other activities of life — we invoke the law of the Golden Mean. Between the muddy flow of the verbose person who is too lazy to endure the fatigue of thoughtful writing, and the perpetrator of "fine" writing that is full of ornament and daintiness, there is a way of writing which fulfils writing's purpose: to convey to us things useful to be known.

Simplicity is a good guide on the middle road. Almost any business executive can go through the carbon copies of the past month's letters from his office and the offices of his subordinates and find many that rival this news report which was scathingly commented on in an issue of *Scientific Monthly*. Instead of saying that an injured man had two black eyes, it said: "He had bilateral perorbital hematoma and left subjunctival hemorrhage." How often is a

simple, clear statement like "haste makes waste" turned by some letter writer into what he believes to be more in keeping with the prestige of his position: "precipitation entails negation of economy."

Simplicity can be lost through making explanations more technical and more detailed than necessary. The Scottish saying is to the point: "Why build the bridge much wider than the road?" Every word that can be spared from a piece of writing is hurtful if it remains, but this does not mean that we advocate telegraph form writing. An apparent superfluity may be part of the necessary graciousness, or of the needed attractiveness, of the piece of composition. Then the word is not expendable.

Concrete and precise

Despite the resources of our language for clarity, beauty, distinctive expression and minute differentiation of meanings, there are people who write their letters and reports in an abstruse, involved, pompous and thoroughly tiresome manner. Simple things are made complex, and complex things are made well-nigh incomprehensible.

Careful writers avoid portmanteau words, loaded with a whole suit-case of meanings. The use of general words instead of particular, or of abstract instead of concrete, may be a saver of the writer's thought processes. We are not here concerned with avoiding the travail in thought of the writer, but with the communication of ideas, and that is hindered if the reader has to deduce the meaning of a communication by a careful sorting and analysis of it.

Says Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch in his book *On the Art of Writing*: "So long as you prefer abstract words, which express other men's summarized concepts of things, to concrete ones which lie as near as can be reached to things themselves and are the first-hand material for your thoughts, you will remain, at the best, writers at second-hand."

Being concrete means that a writer may give an air of informality to matters basically formal, thereby contributing to their understandability. The poet Horace, classic poet of the countryside, had this manner of writing. He did not speak of love, but of a particular girl; not of poverty, but of a row-boat; not of the austere life of old Italy, but of sons carrying firewood; not of tranquillity, but of sheep at a river bank without a breath of wind.

The power of rightly chosen words is very great, but we do not wish to get ourselves enmeshed in the study of words to the point where we quibble and quarrel with our friends about the technicalities of language. This sort of literary affliction is most wearisome to those who are concerned with thoughts and the communication of thoughts.

It is quite another thing to be particular within ourselves, to define our terms so that we know of what we are thinking and what our thoughts about it are. That is the way for a person sincerely seeking to improve communication of ideas to sharpen up blunted

words and restore their cutting edges, or to decide to discard them and get new ones.

When the shoe is on the other foot — when one receives obscure writing — the most effective rebuke is not a tirade upon the writer's faults, but a simple statement: "I do not understand; what do you mean?" That should effectually awaken the offender from his intellectual twilight sleep, and at the same time achieve the reader's purpose, which is understanding.

A paragraph which illustrates the need for precision and concreteness is to be found in Kenneth S. Keyes' useful book *How to Develop Your Thinking Ability*. He points out that the word "dog" may appear a simple word to most people, but animals labelled with the group word "dog" will range from "sassy little handfuls of caninity like the Mexican Chihuahua to massive great Danes. Dogs will range from sweet-tempered and patient animals . . . to pugnacious mutts that probably dream of such delicious adventures as severing human jugular veins."

It is amusing — and not without profit — to make a game with some word used carelessly in a letter one receives. Take the word "dog" for example: whose dog? what sort of dog? is the correspondent writing about that dog today or that dog as it was yesterday or last year? what does he say the dog did? from my experience of the writer, of dogs generally, of dogs of this sort, and of this particular dog, do I believe what the writer asserts?

Now, substitute "contract" or "order" or "machine" for the word "dog" and the practical purpose in the game appears. Much obscurity would be cleared away by such a practice, and we should perhaps learn through it not to be afraid of being simple and demanding simplicity. We should, in our own writing, cease to follow the logic of Sancho Panza in *The History of Don Quixote de la Mancha*: "If you do not understand me, no wonder if my sentences be thought nonsense."

Economy of words

There is no greater aid to clarity than a discreet economy of words, providing, of course, that the right words are used. Roundabout phrases should not be used where single words would serve, and we should not clutter up necessary phrases with useless words. Aristotle remarked in his great treatise *The Poetics* that anything whose presence or absence makes no discernible difference is no essential part of the whole. Art in writing, as in sculpture, often consists in the removal of surplusage.

If we say what we have to say, what we have a will to say, in the simplest, the most direct and exact manner possible to us, with no excess words and no foggy construction to obscure the picture, then we are well on the way toward becoming proficient in the communication of ideas.

The selection of words should be primarily for clarity of expression: do they say unmistakably what

we have in our minds to say? Words, we should remind ourselves often, are labels. It doesn't make much difference how long the yard is, or how heavy a pound is, or what quantity of liquid makes up a gallon. What really is important is that we all mean the same thing when we talk or write about a yard, a pound, and a gallon, or that we make allowance for the difference in meaning. An illustration of the confusion caused by the fact that sometimes two things may be labelled alike and yet have different qualities is afforded by the word "gallon". In Canada the gallon contains 160 fluid ounces whereas in the United States it has only 128. On the other hand, things may have different labels and be the same: like "gasoline" in Canada and "petrol" in Britain.

Add to these difficulties the fact that words pick up subsidiary meanings and personal significances in everyday use, and it begins to appear why great care is needed by the person who is ambitious to communicate ideas successfully.

Whatever aesthetic virtue there is in literature and language, the first concern of language study in schools and universities must be to prepare students to have and to communicate ideas, to seek the best way of expressing an idea in order to share it with others or to accomplish a desired end. But language study does not end with school-days. A person should revise his language habits from time to time in order to keep pace with life and custom and, indeed, necessity.

In language, as in all else, material change is the order of the day. The reality of life is a process, implying continuous change, and this necessitates change in language, adapting it to new conditions.

Two key questions

Meaningful language, says Dr. Wendell Johnson in *People in Quandaries*, a book dealing with the semantics of personal adjustment, is clear and it is designed to be accurate or valid. "It is continually directed by two great questions: 'What do you mean?' and 'How do you know?'"

When we use language we should be concerned with the prime purpose of language: to put together and to convey ideas. Some persons, perhaps readers of this *Monthly Letter*, will write essays which, because of the ideas they convey, will be read a hundred years hence; others will write business letters which, because of their thoughtful handling of facts and their clear presentation of plans, will affect the commercial life of this country.

The only way to reach that stage of perfection is by the practice of writing, but we need not set unrealistically high standards. The urge to be "tops", to break records, to do something bigger and better — like writing the great Canadian novel — these are part and parcel of our age. Reaching for the moon represents a characteristic of our society. The wise person will be content if his everyday writing is recognized as appropriate, accurate, persuasive, and clear.