

OUR LANGUAGE

ANGUS ROSE

Rector, Giyani College of Education

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An experienced teacher and editor of English, Mr Rose was recently appointed Rector of the Giyani College of Education. He is currently also serving a term as President of the English Academy of Southern Africa.

ENSHRINED VALUES

With my very limited knowledge of other languages, I'm willing to bet that there isn't a language under the sun or the moon that doesn't carry all kinds of social and moral attitudes deeply embedded in its vocabulary and syntax. Trying to learn a language without imbibing its values is tantamount to eating steaks hoping not to absorb calories and kilojoules.

Even at a cursory glance we can discern something about values in other languages. Take, for instance, German's requirement that the sequence of time, manner and place be adhered to in every sentence. Look at the French contribution to the vocabulary of the arts, cuisine and fashion; or Italian's to music, art, architecture and so on. These must surely indicate something about the values held by those societies.

Today, people are concerned not so much with these matters but with those attitudes embodied in language which reflect the nature of interpersonal relationships. The politicising of language, together with all kinds of racial consciousness, have shown us that even unconsciously and not intending so to do, it is sometimes impossible not to give offence. In this country, most people are now sensitive and intelligent enough to avoid any terminology used to denote race or nationality that has any kind of overtone suggesting bias or prejudice. Words like kaffir, Frog, Hun, Wop, Wog, Rooinek, Pom, Port, hairyback have all virtually disappeared from the scene - except in certain "hair down" situations. And we are all probably better and more aware of other people as a result.

Of course, some situations now and then arise when bending over backwards brings you back almost to your starting point. The banning of golliwogs as children's toys may well have some logic behind it. To proscribe black plastic bags for refuse (as is the rule in certain London boroughs) because in the eyes of some critics "this equates blackness with rubbish" is patently a kind of paranoia up with which sensible and busy people will probably not put.

The inherent values in all kinds of colour words in English are probably, by now, ineradicable. The over- and undertones of yellow, for example, are firmly embedded. Yellow meaning cowardly is unlikely to be arbitrarily forced out of circulation. Yellow as a warning is here to stay - in traffic lights/robots, on the sides of roads. To equate it with yellow-skinned people is remote.

Again, all manner of uses of black cannot really be eliminated. The Black Death, the Black Country, Black Friday, blackguards, Blackjack, the Black Hole of Calcutta, Black letter days, blackballing, blackmail, the Black Prince, the Black Sea, Black velvet and the Black Watch are all (with many others) features of the language with special referents that have nothing to do with skin pigmentation.

Similarly, black moods, black ice and black diamonds are unlikely to require rephrasing, since they are really connected with inherent blackness far removed from racial matters.

If we are going to become oversensitive to such terminology then we are going to have to rewrite not only the vocabulary, but some literature as well. White Beauty, a white Othello (and a black Desdemona?), The Black Company, The Black South are all revised book titles. Shall we have to talk about something being "as

white as the ace of spades", or a "blackened sepulchre", or a "black elephant"? Will the President live in "The Black House"? One can overdo things, clearly. What is important is to avoid, as far as one is able, giving offence.

IS LANGUAGE A POLITICAL ARENA?

Is language an arena of political battle? Well, it certainly can be, as anyone can tell who has heard recordings of the behaviour of MPs in the House of Commons or delegates to the UN. And we live in an era when language is used for all manner of political ends, from justifying violent aggression to catching votes.

Bertrand Russell invented a little game with English words which neatly illustrates the way we use words not only to convey meaning, but to express our own personal point of view. He took the simple grammatical paradigm for conjugating an English verb (I go, you go, he goes) and adapted it thus: I am a gourmet, you certainly like your food, he wolfs down every meal. I am careful, you are stickler for detail, she is finicky. I am generous, you are extravagant, he is a fool with his money.

You can have a lot of fun - and learn something interesting about yourself and your fellow-men from this game. Take for instance just one statement, put it into one of three columns labelled Favourable, Neutral, Unfavourable and then complete the other two. For example, "thin" is a neutral adjective conveying neither approval nor disapproval. So we complete the columns thus: slender; thin; emaciated.

Try placing each of the following in their appropriate columns and then invent your own version for the other two columns: X is patriotic; Y is a liberal; Z is a good South African; P is a freedom fighter; Q refused to answer; R was not responsible; F has always been thrifty; G is charming; H dresses like a Pearly King on a bank holiday.

Now Russell was not only asking us to entertain ourselves, but to become more aware of how we can convey our emotions through words, and how we can use those words to persuade others to accept, even adopt our own opinions. Continual reference to, and the resultant adoption by the general public of, a term or phrase will ultimately condition our thinking, perhaps our actions. For instance, if we are totally "patriotic" (whether we live in South Africa, the Lebanon or Libya) we accept that those who plant limpet mines on our behalf are "freedom fighters, the forces of liberation or patriots in the struggle for independence". If such limpet strikers belong to another, unacceptable persuasion then they are "terrorist thugs, the fanatic left (or right),

subversive agents" and so on. Yet the bombs explode just the same, and kill and maim "innocent civilians" or "misguided supporters of a wicked regime" whichever the case may be.

On a less bellicose level, we find terms used to hide or disguise harsh realities. Chemical additives to foods are more easily swallowed when they are termed preserving agents. Farmhouse butter needs no further explanation, like Farmer Brown's chickens or Ouma's-rusks. Classroom management facilitators may impress those not particularly responsive to teachers, just as those who look down on lift operators may raise their gaze when they are referred to as elevation superintendents.

Is language a political arena? Read the final pages of George Orwell's 1984 if you want further grist for your mill. And compare the rhetorical techniques used in the several speeches of Mark Antony and Brutus in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. They'll certainly make you think, especially about the way ordinary men and women can be manipulated by the emotive weight of words.

EXAMPLES OF SEXISM

The rise of the feminist movement in Western culture has alerted us to the changing status and role of women in our society. Whereas little more than half a century ago it would scarcely have been possible to think of women as ships' captains, airline pilots, ambassadors, prime ministers, managing directors, professors, superintendents of hospitals and the like, these are commonplace occurrences today.

Some roles are traditionally either male or female: boxers, wrestlers, rugby footballers, stokers, steeplejacks; or nurses, midwives, milkmaids, charladies - though even these distinctions are becoming old hat. So change is on the cards and our language should at least reflect those changes.

Women now rightly deplore the assumption that surgeon, lawyer, architect, editor, banker - even soldier, sailor and airman - should be purely male roles, for women now fulfil them all, often with distinction. Are we therefore to concoct new words; surgeonesse, lawyerette, architectrix to show this female invasion of the male domain?

Surely not, for to add a feminine suffix merely adds injury to the former insult. What we have to do is to change our (male chauvinist?) thinking that prompts us to assume that all surgeons, politicians, astronauts, computer scientists are male. Of course they are not, and we (and that ultimately includes even

South African politicians and other leaders) must accept that without question.

Some attempt has been made to "neutralise" masculine words to avoid tacit assumptions. Thus "mariner" can replace "sailor", "chairperson" chairman, "humankind" mankind, and so on. Where we can do this, and still keep matters normal and sane, we should do so. To speak, however, of writing a mistresspiece, of personing a switchboard, or giving an order to a barperson - this is perhaps going too far.

Consideration must be given, too, to those women who see no valid reason why their marital or single state should be publicly blazoned abroad. The use of the term "Ms" avoids sexist accusation in these circumstances and, despite its ugly sound, is gaining worldwide acceptance. It should be pointed out, however, that not all married women object to being referred to as Mrs Smith; nor do all unmarried women balk at Miss Jones.

The matter of the all-inclusive masculine pronoun is rather more complex. "Any student may approach the Dean (who may, of course, be male or female) if he wishes to change his course of study." A non-sexist version would avoid the use of "he" and "his" (since students are both male and female) by one or other of these stratagems:

- (a) By putting alternatives for the offending words: "Any student may approach the Dean if he or she wishes to change his or her course"!
- (b) By using the pronoun s/he: "Any student may approach the Dean if s/he..."
- (c) By using plurals: Students may approach the Dean if they wish to change their courses.

In practice, (a) can rapidly become exasperating if continued indefinitely. So can the constant occurrence of s/he, so perhaps the most acceptable is (c).

Some words have all kinds of over- and undertones beyond their purely sexist denotations. Consider the differences, not just in gender, but in the tone of the following terms; bachelor and spinster; fathering and mothering; host (Mine Host of Ye Olde Shippe Inn) and hostess. In each case - and in many others - the masculine is complimentary, the feminine more than slightly derogatory.

The best course to follow then, is to avoid as far as is humanly possible giving any kind of offence, either intentionally or otherwise. This can best be achieved by remembering constantly that women are also human beings, that they have proved themselves highly competent in what were formerly considered purely male roles, and that whether mere men like it or not, women are in all probability here to stay and to make even greater dents in male ego-systems.

EUPHEMISMS AND WHITE LIES

English possesses an enormous variety of words all meaning more or less the same thing, and one of its many virtues is the choice available to anyone using the language. Whether other languages also have the same choice is doubtful, for the total vocabulary of English is far vaster - if we judge by the size of dictionaries - than those in other tongues.

Such a selection of words has, of course, both advantages and disadvantages. Among the former is the ready availability of euphemisms - those words which enable us to express the unpleasant aspects of life in more palatable form. I have on my desk a *Dictionary of Euphemisms* which contains more than 300 pages of pleasant English synonyms for certain harsher realities.

A quick glance at the chapter headings shows the areas where gentler alternatives are most frequently needed: Parts of the Body; Blood, Sweat, Tears and other excretions; the Seven Deadly Sins; Death; Crime and Punishment; Sex; the Language of Government; the Game of War. That's quite an illuminating commentary on the English speaker's phobias and taboos, and you can't help wondering whether French, Chinese and Arabic go to the trouble of calling Death the Great Leveller, or a grave plot purchased before it's wanted a pre-need memorial estate. The Eskimos reputedly have some 50 words for different kinds of snow, but no single word for snow itself. To tell an Eskimo about to embark on a lengthy journey by sledge that "It's snowing" would be about as useful as telling him that the moon was made of green cheese.

But back to euphemisms, for which English and the English character have such a vital need. Now the use of euphemisms must be considered acceptable provided the motive for doing so is a genuine consideration for the feelings of others. Using bar-room parlance at the AGM of the Women's Institute clearly won't do (despite the protestations of some hardier females). Nor is it desirable to bend over backwards to such an extent that your use of a euphemism completely obscures your true meaning. "Are you in need of comfort?" to mean "Do you want to go to the lavatory?" is

altogether too twee; and used at a prayer meeting might cause untold confusion.

The great disadvantage of pleasant alternatives is when they are employed to disguise or cover up realities which, if we are honest and prepared to face matters squarely, are best expressed clearly and boldly, and with an accuracy which does credit to both speaker and listener. Much political and war jargon falls into this disreputable category, and is used to hush up harsh realities which should be openly stated. Relocation for enforced removal; red tape for bureaucratic inefficiency; a sphere of influence meaning the domination of a smaller and weaker people; biosphere overload for over-population, and so on. About the only term in this category with any validity is the acronym MAD which neatly summarises the consequences of an all-out nuclear war. Such an event is termed Mutual Assured Destruction.

Another disadvantage arising from the over-use (often deliberate) of euphemisms is that they come to have a whole spectrum of meanings. Thus democratic process has as many interpretations as you wish. Almost any word of political significance ending in -ism or -isation should cause your ears to prickle and arouse your sceptical faculties. A freedom fighter to some is a guerrilla to others and a terrorist to the remainder. Even phrases like public servant and civil service no longer mean what they say.

Fortunately, many "refined" conventions are now either streamlined or have been totally discarded. It used to be customary not long ago in England for a letter from a government department to end thus: "I have the honour to be, Sir, Your obedient servant...". Happily this has now become, with greater honesty and brevity: "Yours truly...". Perhaps it has something to do with the eccentric but laudable practice of one gentleman whose custom it was to end all his letters to government departments with the words: "You have the honour to be, Sir, My obedient servant...".

SOME REDUNDANCIES

In our craze for speed and its concomitant demand for more efficiency, language obviously has to be tailored to the needs of the moment. Many people are now almost too impatient to tolerate the leisurely styles of Jane Austen, or even Dickens and Thackeray, whose prose knew no such 'Organisation and Methods' pressures. Go back even further into Augustan prose, with its antithetical, balanced sentences, its controlled cadences and other prolixities, and few readers are now prepared to spend the time and energy required to appreciate such literary abundances.

Redundancy is the overall term for an excess of words over meaning, the use of more words than necessity demands, a kind of verbal inflation. (You notice I have said the same thing three times, using different words.) Here are further examples: 6 am tomorrow morning; divide up the remainder; free, gratis and for nothing; finally, once and for all. These phrases all use words unnecessarily, though when the phrases become idioms we tolerate these excesses.

Occasionally, redundancy is deliberate, where a writer wishes to convey something particular by the very use of unnecessary words. Richard II speaks this line: "Let them both return back to their chairs again." Now Richard was not a particularly efficient public figure - and Shakespeare stresses this aspect of his character by showing that his language wasn't especially efficient or economical either.

We may assume, with some justification, that people who are sloppy and casual about language aren't particularly good at conveying meaning. From politicians to pop stars come endless examples of excesses of words trying to cover empty meanings: "Well, I - er - like, yer know, we been on the road, yer know, like, for gettin' on for two years like, me and the boys, and it's kinder, well yer know, like sort of time we hit the jackpot, like, innit."

Circumlocution or periphrasis is saying something in a roundabout manner, sometimes for a humorous reason, sometimes to gentle the harshness of a truth. When Woody Allen says: "Some guy hit my fender the other day and I said unto him 'Be fruitful and multiply'" he is using circumlocution for humour. When Donne writes: "It was the year's midnight and the day's" he is, with deliberate intent, using periphrasis to create a puzzling and intriguing mental climate at the start of a poem. When we use phrases like: caught with his fingers in the till, went to his final rest, paying guest, an unwilling guest of the government in Pollsmoor, the nineteenth hole, going through a temporary liquidity crisis - all these soften the blunter realities of the truth.

Occasionally these excesses of words are unconscious and unintentional: boiling up bones to make glue; he was deported back to Ireland; he repeated again what he had said earlier; everyone unanimously agreed; prizes were won by Smith, Jones and Brown respectively; the department is responsible for, inter alia, the issuing of books amongst other things; he insisted emphatically that he was right and that no other explanation was acceptable; my holiday vacation starts next week; she swallowed the antidote to nullify the effects of the poison; exports to foreign countries are down this month. All these indicate a casual

attitude to the use of language - and perhaps to the truths so conveyed; we are entitled therefore to view with some suspicion or at least scepticism these unconscious redundancies.

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Language, just like money, suffers from various kinds of inflation. Too much money chasing too little goods; too many words chasing too little meaning. Perhaps the commonest (and therefore the "cheapest") is the definite article - *the*. It's a fairly common South African habit to scatter "the" all over the place. Look at these examples, taken at random from a single page of text:

- . There's no use in a people's court if the people don't know what to do.
- . The American system uses juries. As a result, the lawyers' arguments matter less than the impression on the jury.
- . Unlike judges, magistrates never have to give the reason for their decision.
- . The Governmental bureaucracy is, despite election promises, growing at an alarming rate.

Now in all those examples, "the" occurs six times, and all with the exception of one, possibly two, are totally unnecessary. Acceptably used is the definite article before "American", where we are referring to one single and definite thing (referent): the American system of law. Before "impression" we might just as well say "their" or "an", so the "the" is not strictly important.

Every other instance is patently extraneous or plain wrong. There is no difference between "the reasons" and "reasons" given (or not) by magistrates; The Government bureaucracy is wrong since "bureaucracy" is a vague abstraction (though its effects are certainly not), contradicted by the use of the definite article. Remember, the definite article must have a definite referent. By removing redundant words, we can "tighten up" our language, say more in fewer words and thus avoid "inflating" our message. Here is a random example, taken from a magazine article:

"He said that the international community had to take note of the fact that most of the black leaders supporting the implementation of disinvestment and sanctions also supported violence."

How we don't really lose much of the sense - if any - if we recast the passage thus: "He said the international community has

to note that most black leaders supporting disinvestment and sanctions supported violence."

That's eleven words gone out of twenty-nine - a saving of some 38 percent, and that's an alarming rate of inflation by anybody's standards. You might ask yourselves - as Shakespeare was fond of asking us - just what kind of person likes using twenty-nine words when eighteen will suffice? And why? High inflation rates - especially in language - are costly, and are certainly not the prerogative of Brazilians and Argentinians.

AVOID CLICHÉS LIKE THE PLAGUE

"I'm sick of all these goddam clichés. Get me some new ones!" The late Sam Goldwyn's comment has justly passed into the quotation books for more than one reason. First, it's a classic example of what has become known as a "Goldwynism" - that is, the kind of statement that depends minimally on logic but which, none the less, contains elements of truth and good sense. Second, his impatience with the cliché is both commendable and encouraging - a precept to be taken seriously.

The word cliché comes (rather obviously) from the French and means literally "a stereotype" which originally meant a metal plate cast from a mould and used by printers to produce limitless numbers of identical copies. It also means "a photographic print". In English, cliché has been taken over as a literary term to mean something - an idea, remark, phrase - which has been so overused and in so identical a manner that both its meaning and its effect have been squandered.

"I know it like the back of my hand; he's as old as the hills; she was bored to tears; bleeding like a stuck pig; head in the clouds; end of your tether; a blessing in disguise..." the list is apparently endless, as long as my arm, and there's more into the bargain where they came from if only I could keep my nose to the grindstone and churn them out slowly but surely...but I'd better put a sock in it and call it a day before you make mincemeat of me. You can take it or leave it, since that's the object of the exercise.

The trouble with clichés is that they atrophy our senses and stop us thinking. (Could that possibly be why clichés are the stock in trade of all politicians?) We know what's coming next, and tend therefore not to listen. Clichés also, by their repetitious nature, tend to obscure the fact that once, when they were new coined, they *did* have significance and a meaning.

Hamlet, you will recall, was once described as "a play full of clichés". But when Shakespeare originally wrote about a sea of troubles, a custom more honoured in the breach than th'observance, the lady protesting too much..., he had something arresting and original to say. When someone reiterates for the umpteenth time something about "sweets to the sweet", it has lost its savour, its impact, its poignant tenderness, and has become merely a sickly and sludgy glob of sentimental claptrap.

Many clichés originate from literary sources - the Bible and Shakespeare chief among them. Other sources are the law (part and parcel; lock, stock and barrel; without let or hindrance); journalism - a rich and fruity field (peace initiatives, political wilderness, informed sources, across the board, in the pipeline); the political scene - a veritable slough of muddied, unoriginal expression (democratic processes, this day and age, strife-torn townships, not in the interests of the state, peace-loving communities, power-sharing...).

Another characteristic of many clichés is their double or treble barrelled and often alliterative form: short and sweet; here and now; neither rhyme nor reason; fast and furious; Tom, Dick and Harry; hook, line and sinker, and (one already cited) lock, stock and barrel.

Sadly, many children at school are nurtured into learning by heart (there's a silly cliché for you!) yards of clichés: as bold as brass, as flat as a pancake, as cold as ice I once asked my teacher why she refused to accept one little boy's phrase: "as free as me on my holidays". "Well," she replied, "it's not the right answer. He should have said 'as a bird'." And that's as good a demonstration as any of the stultifying effects of the cliché on the human mind.