

THE NEW PROSTITUTION

W.D. MAXWELL-MAHON

Professor of English
University of Pretoria

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Everybody knows what is meant by the oldest profession in the world. Even the Bible refers to prostitution. One of the references is in Genesis XI about the sons of Noah who in their pride built a tower to reach Heaven and could not complete it because their language was confounded. The tower of Babel, which is a standing lesson of the prostitution of language to serve false gods, has been re-built in our times on an unprecedented scale. It has been re-built by the pimps of public utterance, by all those who prostitute language for monetary gain or personal aggrandizement.

If he did nothing else, George Orwell deserves permanent recognition for placing an imaginative spotlight on the new prostitution of language, Newspeak, the twisted terminology of 1984; and the Ministry of Truth from which this government-controlled vocabulary originates, shows how words can be used to forge chains that bind down any free thought or free expression of thought. Right is wrong, wrong is right, according to the prevailing political climate in Orwell's totalitarian State. As he says in his essay 'Politics and the English language', the great enemy of clear language is insincerity and a sincere politician is a contradiction in terms.

At present, some 700 million people in the world speak English with reasonable fluency. Millions more have a working knowledge of the language. Since the end of World War II, English has become the general *lingua franca*. There is good reason, then,

for keeping the language clean. We cannot afford to let the English words we use become like old bitches gone in the teeth. To advertise for a shpeherd, as the English borough county of Islywyn did recently, under the heading of 'animal liaison officer' is prostitution of language. Are we then, asked the columnist of the London *Daily Telegraph*, to re-write the Bible? Will the new revised edition refer to the animal liaison officers who watched their flocks by night in Bethlehem? Or to the Lord as my liaison officer?

The spread of verbal call girls, to push the metaphor a little further, is like one of the plagues of Egypt. The contemporary refusal or plain inability to call a spade a spade by professional people has led to such abortions as marriage being defined as 'serial monogamy', an engaged man or woman being called 'the significant other', and prisons being referred to as 'therapeutic correctional centres'. No doubt the tender sensibilities of many of us are easily wounded, so are the socially acceptable way of avoiding direct statements that may prove fatal. On the other hand, the refusal to tell it like it is has inevitably bred morons who will do anything except say what they mean and mean what they say.

There is a field of discourse in which explicit statement is a *sine qua non*. Pornography. Writers of pornography make sure that we know who is doing what to whom and how often. Just how far pornographers actually corrupt the morals and weaken the constitution of readers is very much an open question. One thing is sure. Pornography does not prostitute language in the way we have just described. The Anglo-Saxon 'four-letter' words have been part and parcel of the English language since before the Norman Conquest. And the language is none the worse for this scatological and erotic feature.

Nowadays we take it for granted that Government spokesmen, politicians, and public figures will use their own brand of Newspeak e.g. Haigspeak, McDonaldspeak, Hawkespeak, to fuzz unpleasant and unpopular facts. Organizations such as the CIA and Pentagon together with their equivalents outside America do this with sinister intent. For example, assassination becomes 'executive action' or 'neutralization', full-scale military engagements on the field of battle become 'escalation of contact points', the imprisonment of persons without trial or any specific charge against them being laid becomes 'protective custody', and spying activities become 'micro-managing the scenario intelligence-wise'. Hugh Rawson, in his recently published and vastly entertaining *Dictionary of Euphemisms and Other Doubletalk*, recalls the comments of John Dean III about Watergate:

If Richard Nixon had said to me, 'John, I want you to do a little crime for me. I want you to obstruct justice', I would have told him he was crazy and disappeared from sight. No one thought about the Watergate cover-up in those terms - at first, anyway. Rather it was 'containing' Watergate or keeping the defendants 'on the reservation' or coming up with the right public relations 'scenario' and the like.

(*Introduction*, p.4)

Contemporary Newspeak and its kind is not always designed with the specific intention of obscuring criminal acts. Often the speaker simply cannot for the life of him talk plain common sense. Witness the announcement made a few months ago by the finance director of the Worcestershire district council in England. You would need acute powers of extra-sensory perception to make out what he was trying to say:

Parish expenditure still ranks as expenditure in the calculation of a grant receipt, but the formula for calculation of grants has been changed so that this council does not receive any grant on the expenditure that ranks for grants according to the calculation that does not allow for it.

Clearly, English is in a bad way. But the grammatical purists who campaign so vigorously for the clean-up of the language so as to remove from it anything that smacks of the street tend to forget the living principle of speech. Neologisms are being created almost daily to record the rapid changes in our social and cultural conditions. More important still, with the world becoming a global village through electronic media there is a constant merging of tongues with English. The French don't like this at all. The Institut National de la Langue Francaise in Paris has in desperation asked the University of London to assist in identifying and cataloguing the so-called 'franglais' patois that threatens the purity of French. This patois has led to such adaptations from English as 'le rock musique', 'le teenagers', 'le sniffer' (i.e. drug addict), and 'le quick-snack'.

As further evidence of the rapidity with which English is changing in itself, apart from the way it is changing other languages, there is the publication this year by Cambridge University Press of a semi-annual magazine appropriately entitled *English Today*. The magazine is seen as filling the need of readers to keep up-to-date with the changes taking place in the English vocabulary - changes that happen so quickly that they cannot be recorded in supplements to standard dictionaries. This

is another way of confirming that dictionaries are out-of-date the minute they are published. Dr T. McArthur, the editor of *English Today*, has commented on the main source of the neologisms that justify his job:

Slang and other usage flows almost exclusively from the U.S.A. to England these days and not vice versa as in the past, except perhaps in the field of punk rock. But you can rest assured that the Americanisation of England will never be complete.

English as generated from the United Kingdom will certainly continue to vitalise the language shared with America and all former colonies of the Empire. Still, the fact remains that America is exerting the greatest contemporary influence on the re-shaping of the mother tongue. The point of origin for this influence is the San Francisco Bay area of the west coast of the United States. This area is described most aptly by Cyra McFadden in her novel, *The Serial: a Year in the Life of Marin County* (1976) as 'the consciousness-raising capital of the western world'. A little thought will show how true this statement is about point of origin. From the San Francisco Bay area come the cults and cult figures, the trend-setters and professional sophisticates, the youth movements and media fads, generating the language that becomes part of our language in the course of time.

David Lodge, who devotes a complete chapter of his *Working with Structuralism* (1981) to McFadden's novel, calls the language of the Bay area Psychobabble. He uses the term because the people of the area are given over to describing their states of mind and the shifts and changes of their human relationships as though they were permanently reclining on a psychiatrist's couch. McFadden is able to reproduce the Psychobabble in her novel with satirical effect. For illustration, here is the heroine of the novel musing about the trial separation from her husband:

She was even laid back, at least publicly, about Harvey's liaison with Marlene, the eighteen-year-old Safeway checker he was living with in that plastic condo in Greenbrae. If Harvey thought getting it on with some bubble-gum rocker was realizing his full human potential well, that was his prerogative - although she *was* disappointed that he'd go that route because it was all so predictable. Every husband Kate knew took up with some little postadolescent with acne as soon as he split from his wife.

She realized it had to do with the whole macho bit in Western culture. In his pathetic way, Harvey was trying to prove something. She did, however, resent the fact that he was uptight about the support money he gave her and complained all the time about his 'cash flow'. It wasn't her fault, as she told Carol, if he was having a tough time keeping Marlene in Motown records and Clearasil.

(pp. 36-7)

The life-style, as the term goes, of Kate and her friends involves being 'into' postural integration, hatha and raja yoga, integral massage, Neo-Reichian bodywork, actualism and any other new cult that sweeps Marlin county with its catch-words and esoteric jargon forming another Tower of Babel. The novel, which became a motion picture in America, was reviewed with telling force by the *New York Times*. The reviewer remarked:

Just maybe, if enough people read this book, everybody will be so embarrassed that we'll go back to speaking the English language again.

Trying to get back to speaking clear and meaningful, but also imaginatively expressive, English again is hampered by other instances of the prostitution of language. These instances can only be glanced at here. The late and unlamented German Third Reich showed the power of propaganda in confusing thought through misusing words. The bigger the lie, the easier it is for people to believe it. Advertising copywriters, or the 'hidden persuaders' as Vance Packard described them, are past masters in using distorted words and twisted meanings to create myths about power, sex, wealth, and health that lead people to part with their money in the search for wish-fulfilment. The Kiss-kiss, Bang-bang picture books, romances, and TV soap operas such as 'Dallas' are parodies of real life that never descend from the over-inflated level of high hysteria.

So, what are we to do about the parlous state of English? How can we cut down on the growing prostitution of language? It is often argued that subjecting present schoolchildren to the rigours of formal grammar will ensure their immunity in later life from the disease of corrupt English. Certainly, the return on a full scale of grammar to the schools is essential. America, the land of anything goes, has begun to realise that big business is suffering from a plethora of illiterate managers. The dollar talks in that country. So there has been a concerted drive to get grammar back on the syllabi and this drive will eventually, if it has not already done so, be carried on by the rest of the English-speaking world. While welcoming any move to

re-introduce the study of grammar it must also be firmly asserted that grammar alone will not check the spread of modern Newspeak. We need something more. What schoolchildren have to be taught are the elements of textual analysis and to be taught this at the earliest age possible.

Textual analysis has always been with us. It began with Plato and the Sophists and continues as a discipline in changed form during our time. As a basic in such analysis, there is still nothing to beat the method of Practical Criticism introduced at university level in England by the psychologist I.A. Richards some 60 years ago. As we know, Richards is often called the 'father of New Criticism'.

Like all innovators, his principles have been distorted and mis-used by his followers, particularly by the formalists of the school of New Criticism in America. It is often said that the paradigm formed by Richards with his Practical Criticism acronym of SIFT left out too much of the way in which the mind works when confronted by unfamiliar media of communication. But Richards was dealing with basics. At the level of primary perception, we all tend to work through the SIFT stages of identification and comprehension. Anybody involved in teaching analysis to beginners will be able to confirm how accurately Richards categorised the process of reading for meaning.

Nowadays, the bias in analysis is on the structural features of texts. Structuralism, to which there is still strong resistance from the academic Old Guard, has much that is of practical value in counteracting Orwell's nightmarish prediction of a world without honest words. We can, for instance, adapt Roland Barthes's five codes to determine the self-consistency of a text and, by extension, the relationship between the text and the world around it. Greimas and G enette have much to offer the searcher for textual truth in their identification of the actantial logic of any statement. Deliberate shifts in the subject matter so as to confuse the reader are easily revealed by applying suitable structuralist methodology.

A final comment: many people will argue that the concern expressed here about the English language going to the dogs is a case of over-reaction, that English allows for grammatical and syntactical manipulation in a way that no other language does, and that words mean whatever we intend them to mean irrespective of any confusing or contradictory structure they might have on occasion. The usage argument, however, poses the questions: whose usage and to what end? It is justifiable to insist that language defines its subject matter for those to whom it is

addressed. Such definition is as much of personal as it is of public concern. G.L. Brook reminds us, in his *Varieties of English* (1979), of the need to keep our own linguistic house in order at a time of general disorder:

It is a very good habit to get into the way of defining the terms that we use, even if we only do it to ourselves, and it is often surprisingly difficult. It need cause us no surprise if the definition of quite a simple word turns out to be complicated. A common piece of schoolboy whimsy is to ask someone to define a spiral staircase, in order to find out how many people have to resort to gesture language accompanied by some vague phrase like 'A thing that goes round and round'. One exception to this common type of reply was provided by a man who replied with quiet confidence: 'A circle with an upward tendency.'

(p. 151)

In its own way, this debate about the prostitution of language is rather like the definition of a spiral staircase. By turning back to the original premises, we can raise our level of linguistic expectancy as the prime requirement for using English in Southern Africa - or anywhere else in the world.