

SOME INCONCLUSIVE COMMENTS CONCERNING JARGON

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The attitude of the public to the proliferation, within any discipline, of specialized terminology (alias 'jargon'), is fickle. In some cases, complex verbal structures are regarded as an outrage against taste, good sense and propriety, while in other cases, desperate attempts are made to ingest the correct terms. This seemingly arbitrary reaction derives from the very best intentions (as a rule), and a crude rule-of-thumb method. Let me first eliminate the extreme examples which give specialized terminology the bad name of 'superfluous jargon'. There are cases in which the use of specialized terms adds nothing but opacity to an issue: referring to a lie as an 'etymological inexactitude' would fall into this category (if one disregards the intentional humour implicit in such a ridiculous substitution). In such cases, we may all shriek in horror, but such obvious cases are few. Nevertheless, they have given rise to an entire, and complex, procedure for reacting to specialized terms based, as I have said, on a crude distinction: if terminology contributes to an area of knowledge, it is said to be enriching, ennobling, and worthy of respect; if terminology is seen to exist as a kind of icing, obscuring the cake and adding nothing to our understanding of the cake's shape, weight and colour, then it is an affront to our sensibilities. If jargon is intrinsic to the discipline in which it is employed, it is healthy; if it sits uneasily atop the subject, it is dangerous and mean. And the public is fickle in that this test is applied often without any knowledge at all of the subject 'ennobled' or 'diseased' by jargon. It is assumed by those who make use of this crude test that reality exists apart from verbal structures, and that we can have knowledge of reality quite distinct from those structures. But the outcome of the test is quite dependent upon public myths and the smattering of knowledge to which the non-specialist has access. So, for instance, an incomprehensible lecture on nuclear physics delivered by a cute teddy-bear of a grandfather with a few delightful quirks, is a superb lecture, and

the lecturer is a 'clever' man. If an incomprehensible lecture on bottling beetroot is delivered by an aloof and arrogant pedant, the lecture is a hopeless and pretentious failure. Society has very definite ways of dealing with such lectures and such lecturers, a method which contains about the same degree of rationality and mercy as a medieval witch-hunt.

The entire system of judgement is based on flimsy criteria and social prejudice, and would be hilarious if not often dangerous. Nuclear physics is allowed to have jargon, because of the average man's reverence for science; beetroot bottling is a 'simple' issue, and needs no jargon. Physics is a discipline which is very often intentionally kept at bay — one may delight (at a distance) at those clever men who, in the name of Progress, keep taking bigger and bigger bites out of the unknown, keeping us snug in our ignorance. And the beetroot bottler? He needs to be cut down to size, because beetroot bottling is an activity already mastered and practised by many, which really does not require nonsensical and abstract consideration. Many prejudices are at work here — to question the public's attitude to jargon is to question the fabric of society.

The situation among professionals within any particular discipline is not better, but very different. The rule here for defining jargon is equally as crude: all of those words with which one is familiar (whether they be quite unknown to the layman) are 'necessary', and those words which one does not use are regarded as 'jargon'. It is very clever to isolate poetic ambiguity; it is pretentious to isolate 'controlled polysemy' (which incidentally is more precise than the former term). But I do not wish to appear biased; in fact, bias is the issue that complicates the entire debate, and bias prevents any reaction other than one's prior, entrenched prejudice. To those who are unkindly disposed towards jargon, regular jargon-bashing is an invigorating pursuit; to those who emphasize the merits of jargon, jargon-bashers are total brutes.

The fierce antagonism within particular disciplines, due to differences in attitude concerning jargon and its usefulness, might never be resolved since, to a considerable degree, this antagonism can be traced to attitudes and prejudices extrinsic to the central concern. By this I mean that very often a distrust of jargon may be traced not simply and honourably to a healthy absence of gullibility, but to an insecurity. And similarly, an overenthusiastic response to the merits of jargon may be traceable to an urge to be obscure, to conceal, to be windy.

I will examine this in more detail, and with reference to an area within literary study which provides a focus for much antagonistic

debate — literary theory. An examination of the real bases for such vigorously defended views on the subject's propensity for jargon might clear the air. Airing prejudices is always commendable, though one cannot expect them to blow away as a result.

A basic distrust of the literary theorist's endeavour finds much to support itself by means of an attack on jargon. The attitude finds voice perhaps most successfully in an article by Thersites Minor, writing from the 'Metafaculty' of the 'Famous Critics School', entitled, 'How to be a Newer Critic: Metonymic Mumbblings or A Generative Lexicon of Apposite Apothegms'. The article begins with the following sound advice:

To write the Newer or Higher Criticism it is not so much a matter of pursuing an argument or exploring a text as invoking the right Words. One's critical posture is almost immediately revealed by the choice of sanctified words and familiar constellations of phrases. Schools and charters of critical privilege are, however, frequently dissolved or reorganized, so it is crucial that the aspiring critic not be caught on the ledge of yesterday's discarded lexicon.

The implicit critique in Minor's analysis is that theorizing about literature is, at least, burdened by excessive jargon, if not entirely supported and sustained by it. And in some cases this supposition is correct. Incomprehensible theoretical passages may sometimes be translated into 'ordinary language', revealing hardly anything beneath the flow of pompous language. But all too often the situation does not conform to these clear-cut rules: an un-discriminating and vicious attack on all jargon-impregnated passages often reveals an insecurity within the proud defender of 'simple and ordinary language'. In short, this hero may not have as clear a grasp on the content of the passage as he should have. And for an onslaught against the excessive use of jargon to be successful, it requires a familiarity with theories of meaning, intention, the communication process; in fact, with far more than the clever mockery of terminology.

But before confronting the problem head-on, one needs to examine the efficacy of arguments which posit the necessity of jargon. Firstly, and most cogently, it may be argued that jargon is necessary for precision of expression. It may also be necessary to underline any subtle difference between an older term or concept, and its more sophisticated replacement. But very often, the introduction of new specialized words may have no such obvious arguments and justifications to resort to. A specialized term may have the same semantic content as its predecessor. But even here the introduction of terms may be justified: if, in the 1980s, the term 'critical strategy' replaces 'critical approach' without

the introduction of any significant alteration in meaning, the purpose may be to align the term with a new style of thought, or even to suggest that older styles of thought should not be appealed to. By analogy, the casting of Sean Connery as the hero in *Zardoz* may not have been successful despite excellent acting, since, by association, the audience expects the silenced pistols, leggy beauties, and supercars of the James Bond movies to dominate each successive scene. Terms may become anachronistic, by means of purely co-incidental association. If, in the twentieth century, we pride ourselves on our knowledge of the concept of beauty, we shy away from the use of the term in case it evokes (laterally and not logically) the clumsiness and naiveté of pre-modern theories of beauty. Is this not often reason enough to support the introduction of new terms? Ideally, yes ... but if this happens every decade, in every new swing of current research and methodology, the problem becomes complicated.

Finally, in order to voice at least a reasonable opinion on the use or abuse of jargon, one needs to move beneath or beyond the signifier, the signified, and the presumed simple correspondence between them, to an examination of how words mean. Perhaps the reason why those in favour of cluttering the language still have total freedom, and those opposed to it can continue to insult every theorist who uses jargon (regardless of the theorist's merit), is that too many opinions are offered too readily. In order to explore the issue fully, one may have to resort to infinite regression: an examination of jargon leads to an examination of meaning, which in turn leads to an examination of perception, which in turn leads to an examination of reality and finally to Cartesian doubt. This sounds ridiculous, but perhaps we need to be thorough. At least such an inclusive perspective will help to place the issue in the context of Western knowledge. One may begin to realize that the word/concept relationship is complicated, or one may dissolve the issue in the far greater problem of whether meaning is capable of 'linguistic transmission' (in other words, perhaps, 'do words make sense?'). And all of this requires the introduction of still newer terms, since the notion of language is at stake. Jacques Derrida (after Heidegger) resorts to the deletion of concepts in order verbally to defend his thesis that meaning is nonpresent in the word. We arrive at the (perhaps necessary) absurdity of statements like, 'The ~~sign~~ is that ill-named ~~Thing~~'. What happens then? Silence? One is always tempted to go back to digging in the garden at this point, to be able to say with absolute confidence, when asked, 'I am digging with a spade in the garden', smirking all the while at Derrida. But the problem of jargon (and its infinite regression into silly, profoundly important problems of ontology, meaning theory and metaphysics) remains, since there are kinds of spades, kinds of digging, and kinds of gardens.