

# PSYCHOBABBLE: OUR FUTURE LANGUAGE?

by Christopher Reid

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'Hear me. I mean, no way I'm about to lay a bad trip on you. I'm not coming down like heavy duty on value judgments.

'You know the parameters and where it's at. If you've got your head together, you'll know where I'm coming from. You into my space? Wow! I'm really into, you know, I mean how you went with your initial crisis reaction. Aw-wright!'

English, in a manner of speaking, in the 1970s. Here are two other examples of this way with words: 'Harvey, I'm gonna tell you something up-front. Even if it means the end of this relationship, like, this is going to be brutal OK? You tell me if I'm wrong here because I'm open to it. But I'm picking up this signal from you, you know what I mean? I mean hostility. Now, hostility's cool, you know. It's OK. But you wanna work through it, because you are what you do. Think about it, Harv.' – Jerry, in Cyra McFadden's book, *The Serial*.

'My experience is that if I can tell you the truth, just lay it out there, then I have totally opened up a space for you to be who you are and that it really opens up all the room in the world for us to do whatever we want to do in regard to each other. If I don't like you, I'll tell you. And that's great.' – John Denver, singer.

For an explanation of my first paragraph, more in a minute. What the other two meant is perhaps best left as vague as it appears.

The suspicion that both deeply wanted to bash someone may not be fair. They wanted to tell all, yet they said nothing.

They were speaking *Psychobabble*, the *Newspeak* of our age – puerile pap, specious speech, yet a dangerously pretentious nonsense talk which one day could engulf us all.

Here's a rough translation of the opening paragraph: 'I don't want to disturb you with grave intellectual opinions. But I'm sure, with your understanding, you will grasp my point of view. Good.

I'm delighted you can accept this without any upset. Splendid!

Nobody quite knows when psychobabble began. It was named only recently in a book called *Psychobabble* by R.D. Rosen, an author from Boston.

The most likely origins were on the opposite side of America and a likely source is Marin, a county in California. Here lives another opponent of *psychobabble*, Cyra McFadden, whose succinctly satirical book, *The Serial*, topped a best-seller list.

She cleverly mocked the manners and morals and especially the 'mindless prattle' of the *psychobabblers*, among whom she lives.

This article owes much to these two books.

It is no coincidence that *psychobabble* is spoken most monotonously by an affluent middle-class taking selfconscious care in their pride that the luxurious life should never mean vulgarity.

The Marinites have taste. They would dearly like to remind us of this, except of course, taste is not mentioned by those who know they have it.

For them, Los Angeles and 'that whole southern California bit' is sun-baked territory with half-baked people in white patent leather shoes and matching pastel leisure (pronounced *leezher*) suits whose conversational preoccupation is money, demonstrated by driving Bentley Continentals while wearing shorts.

In Marin they are 'heavily into' modesty. One drives a Volvo while wearing tailored blue overalls, never washed but dry cleaned in case the Esso sign on the back runs red. Marin is where many beautiful human beings live, they would like you to know. Ascetic and aesthetes all, they are also heavily into lentil soup and grande cuisine, second-hand clothes and tennis parties, herbal tea and large Tequila Sunrises, getting rid of body toxins and taking cocaine, puffing pot, and a no-smoking zone from Monterey to Cape Cod. Marin, divided from San Francisco by the bay, is absolutely not, you understand, a suburb. That is why it is so far out. It provides an 'ultra high psychic energy dynamic' but is also very 'laid back'. It is where you can buy dope on a credit card from a pedlar who keeps the stash in a brief case, but agonises about whether or not the case should be leather (animal product) or plastic (non bio degradable).

Conspicuous consumption in Marin is a very, very cool trip. Cool trippers, those who 'go with the flow while experiencing the whole eclectic gestalt in the cosmic overview process' tend to be, as reported, middle-aged (they hate that), middle-class and moneyed: rejecting the hedonism of the bourgeoisie while directing the inner self to simplicity can be expensive.

One week's abnegation of opulence at the *mind farms* – as

opposed to health farms – which dot California can cost a rich recluse over R800.

But it is from these merchants of spirituality, the ‘human potential movement’, that much of the tiresome cant which is *psychobabble* emanates.

As a language it is not as sinister as the planned creation of *Newspeak* in 1984. However, as Orwell explained in an appendix, *Newspeak* was to supersede traditional English only by 2 050. *Psychobabble* may beat his deadline. Orwell’s description of *Newspeak* remains prophetic: ‘The purpose of *Newspeak* was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotee but to make all other modes of thought impossible’.

Cyra McFadden has written: ‘While elsewhere in the country one hears *psychobabble* spoken by members of the ‘counterculture’ here, the counterculture has come from under the counter and become the dominant culture itself, its dialect the language of polite society that one must speak in order to belong’.

It spreads from a cult to an elite, and perhaps finally to becoming the language of the middle-to-upper classes.

The danger of *psychobabble* is precisely that nobody deliberately invented it. It is spoken all over California, in bars and on buses, on television and in boardrooms, in drawing rooms and in vegetarian communes. It is established on the East Coast and is beginning to catch on in south east England. Youth, with its babble language disseminated by the international pop music network, is *psychobabble*’s leading export vehicle. But teenage *psychobabble* is almost pidgin, confined – at least in the presence of adults – to monosyllabics mixed with ghetto drug slang and four letter words, such as *far out*, *Gross*, *Freaky* and *Shit*. In Marin the most verbose *psychobabblers* are the prosperous parasites – or ‘service industry professionals’ if you like – of the super rich: Plastic surgeons, landscape architects, dentists, urban planners, sociologists, corporate lawyers, bankers, advertising executives or child psychologists.

Marinites float, in McFadden’s phrase, in a ‘sybaritic miasma’. They have reached for and grasped an apparent paradise. But the Marinite sybarites, in their lavish, post-industrial limbo, are apparently not fulfilled. Having passed by the struggle which afflicts most of us, the plastic surgeons and landscape architects who have done so much to beautify us and our surroundings, seem to feel they have missed ‘the fundamental human experience’ – a phrase which is one of the foundation stones of *psychobabble*.

R.D. Rosen quotes the social historian Russell Jacoby: ‘The more the development of late capitalism renders obsolete, or at least

suspect, the real possibilities of self or self-fulfilment, the more they are emphasised as if they could spring to life through an act of will alone'. Rosen comments: 'If Jacoby is right, and I think he is, then *psychobabble* must be seen as the expression not of a victory over dehumanisation, but as its latest and very subtle victory over us. What the casual use of *psychobabble* accomplishes is this: it transforms selfunderstanding, which each must gain gradually through experience and analysis, into tokens of selfunderstanding that can be exchanged between people, but without any clear psychological value'. The sterility of the lush life, the paradoxical experience of those who have arrived at it by their late thirties or early forties, appears even emptier by comparison with their early twenties. Many middle-class Americans of the Marinite type are a product of the heady student days of the early sixties: the clashes at Berkeley and other universities which stimulated campus protests all over the world. With America technically at peace in the world, they sought interior peace for themselves. Not that this is discreditable, but concerned so much with themselves and the vanished glorious days, they developed a language to describe their new position. For lack of a dialectic, they gave us a dialect: *psychobabble*.

I have offered some examples of *psychobabble* and tried to show its origins and history. Now let us take a closer look at the monster itself. This is Rosen's description: It is a jargon which 'seems to free-float in an all-purpose linguistic atmosphere, a set of repetitive verbal formalities that kills off the very spontaneity, candour, and understanding it pretends to promote. It's an idiom that reduces psychological insight to a collection of standardised observations, that provides a frozen lexicon to deal with an infinite variety of problems. *Uptight*, for instance, is a word used to describe anything from mild uneasiness to clinical depression. To ask why someone refers to another as being *hung-up* elicits a reply that reveals neither understanding nor curiosity: 'Well, you know, he's just, well, hung-up'. And interestingly, those few psychiatric terms borrowed by *psychobabble* are used recklessly. One is no longer fearful; one is *paranoid*. Increasingly, people describe their moody acquaintances as manic-depressives, and almost anyone you don't like is *psychotic* or at the very least, *schizzed-out*'.

*Psychobabble* and its speakers are also maddeningly smug. Trying a rational argument is like trying to chew on candy floss; it disintegrates into a sticky sweetness without offering a trace of nutrition. Opinions are dismissed as *value judgments* as if they were unspeakable oaths. Or one is told with a beatific smile: 'I don't *relate* to that. It's not in the *space where I'm at*. It's just not in my *conceptualisation* of personal *meaningfulness*'. The almost

mesmeric response of the *psychobabbler's* *I hear you, I hear you*, when one is offering something important, is an example both of complacency and selfishness.

The intrusion of *I* as in *I know, I mean, I grab* is to direct the emphasis to the person who is supposed to be listening. 'It means,' as Cyra McFadden points out, 'that the focus is on me the listener; pay attention to me; see how sensitive I am.' Except, of course, the listener is not listening.

This current preoccupation with self was spotted in America years ago by Tom Wolfe's label of the 'Me' generation. Rosen demurs here by suggesting: 'Their words don't belong to them so much as to the current *guru* of choice or best-selling self-help book. It's as if they've rented their insights for the occasion'.

*Psychobabble's* intrinsic lack of humour could be its weakest point. We can defeat it. All we need is plain English and good jokes.

[Author's Note: *The Serial: a year in the life of Marin County* by Cyra McFadden is published by Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1977; *Psychobabble: fast talk and quick cure* by R.D. Rosen is published by Atheneum, New York, 1977.]