



In Praise of Stark Lucidity

How scholarly obscurity is threatening our
humanistic values

by Bruce D. Price

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What I like to call Ph.D illiteracy – impenetrable prose by those who should know better – has become more the rule than the exception. The ‘soft sciences’ of sociology, psychology, linguistics, education, and dear old anthropology are safe ports for gibberish. Even respectable physicists and biologists and architects are infected and fairly delirious with the babble of words in no hurry to say very much.

Here’s a paragraph from a book by a noted sociologist:

Motoric reproduction processes. The third major component of modeling phenomena involves the utilization of symbolic representations of modeled patterns in the form of imaginal and verbal contents to guide overt performances. It is assumed that reinstatement of representational schemes provides a basis for self-instruction on how component responses must be combined

and sequenced to produce new patterns of behavior. The process of representational guidance is essentially the same as response learning under conditions where a person behaviorally follows an externally depicted pattern or is directed through a series of instructions to enact novel response sequences. The only difference is that, in the latter cases, performance is directed by external cues whereas, in delayed modeling behavioral reproduction is monitored by symbolic counterparts of absent stimuli.

When you understand something, you can give examples. Give two examples of what the famous sociologist is talking about.

An editor at one of the leading publishers of college texts recently told me: 'I literally don't know what our authors are talking about sometimes. They meander. They use this terrible language. And their organization is so poor, I have to call them up and have them tell me what they mean'.

FARK

In fact, some people have started to snicker. Not long ago, an anonymous cynic (apparently an anthropologist) sent me a 'Folklore Article Reconstruction Kit' (FARK) which can quickly generate over 40 000 sentences of the kind I'd like to see on the wane. Any hundred of these sentences, say the instructions, will create 'a Guaranteed Folklore Contribution to human knowledge. You will then be certain of Forging to the Front in the advancing horde of next year's Ph.D.s, fighting it out for the cushier jobs in University and Government'.

The kit consists of four groups of sentence fragments, numbered 1 to 10. You simply pick any four-digit number at random and then let each digit designate one fragment from each of the four lists. The number 3923, for instance, spits out this cut-glass gem: 'From the intercultural standpoint, my proposed independent structuralistic concept maximizes the probability of project success while minimizing cross-cultural shock elements in improved sub-cultural compatibility-testing'.

Unfortunately, my files bulge with examples of the real thing not much different from this mechanically generated nonsense. Even more unsettling, I have the sensation that I'm closer to understanding this kit-produced sentence than I am to understanding some of the man-produced sentences quoted earlier. What we're up against is stacks of 50-cent words and phrases that somehow add up to 5 cents worth of meaning. An inflation, I will argue, that we cannot afford.

The instructions, by the way, promise future kits 'for Ph.D.s in Sociology (SARK), Linguistics (LARK), Bio-Physics (BARK), and especially in Neo-Humanistics (NARK) Computer-extrusion of Folklore articles, by the yard or until turned off, is also an obvious possibility through FARK'. Thomas Middleton, who writes 'Light Reflections' for *Saturday Review*, once generated both amusement and hostility by a most gentle rebuke to obscurity in a new branch of sociology. He quoted a passage similar to the one I cited at the outset, and lamented that he had been unable to decipher it.

'A RIGHT to TECHNICAL LANGUAGE'

One indignant professor, leaping to the barricades, wrote back arguing that sociologists and, indeed all disciplines, have 'a right to a technical language'. A claim we must ponder. Certainly, there are technical terms — whether 'neutron' in physics or 'water column' in oceanography or 'scale' in music — and one has to know these to read intelligently in the field. But technical terms do not a language make. And terms are not so much the problem in this kind of writing as grammar.

The problem, quite simply, is that the writer is illiterate in the peculiar way that 20 years of education makes possible. The kid on the street corner in Harlem who says, 'I can't git no kinda work', is less illiterate than the sociologist quoted, since communication — how fast, how completely — must be the index of who's literate and who's not.

I submit that the professor's 'right to a technical language' is brainless nonsense, on a par with your right — *undeniable, if you insist* — to express your thoughts in Pig Latin or dead languages or astrological symbols.

What I'm arguing for here is that the best and the brightest have a special obligation to act like it. To set high standards of lucidity. To speak and write for the family of man, or at least the community of the educated and curious. The acid test is: can the writer improve the clarity of his prose without diminishing content? 'Yes' means you're not ready to publish.

LOVE of KNOWLEDGE?

George Orwell offers a helpful insight: 'One can write nothing readable unless one constantly struggles to efface one's personality'. Scientists and scholars of all types, often loud in praise of their own objectivity, should not have to hear this admonition. And yet what does one sense in so much bad prose but a round-about

groping for grandeur? Far from effacing themselves, too many of our intellectual leaders are saying: look at me, I've got something really, really profound to say, so deep and significant that you ordinary minds cannot dare hope to grasp my meaning. And to make sure this pompous declaration turns out true, they express their message more cryptically than Kabbalists.

What we seem to need is more love of knowledge and less love of effect. Orwell also said: 'Good prose is like a windowpane'.

AN ANECDOTE

Students, not knowing any better, are often awed by impenetrable prose. They don't question the tough going. Which is a big mistake.

At a party I spoke with an older student, a woman who had worked for several years and then gone back to finish her B.A. in 'early childhood education'.

She said: 'Well, some of these concepts are very complex. I have to read them two or three times to be sure I can understand them'.

I said: 'I just don't believe there are so many concepts that are hard to understand. Give me an example. I'll bet it can be put simply'.

She said: 'Oh, you mean — Oedipus complex, male child desires mother and this is resolved by age three; female child desires father and this is resolved by age three or *never*'.

There, she had taken one of those supposedly complex concepts and stated it in record time. 'That', I said, 'is my point'.

She laughed nervously, *apparently at her own audacity*. She had never been so intimate with succinctness before and wasn't sure how it felt. Perhaps she feared that one of her professors would leap through the window and flunk her for failure to obfuscate.

That's no joke. *Harper's* recently ran an article about students who write as badly as their teachers in order to get good grades (not to mention grants). The writer called the students 'straight-A illiterates'. My own notion is that we can't hold 19-year-olds accountable for very much of anything. Departmental chairpeople and authors of books and scholars of renown we can.

'J MPWF ZPVI'

There are two entirely different kinds of complexity, that of thought and that of expression. Ph.D. illiterates hope that we'll forget this distinction. They'd like us to see difficult, even totally obscure, expression and think: heh, this must be deep thought. Usually it's deep fraud.

Too many writers are specializing in what is, in practical effect, code. And too many readers are spending the bulk of their time deciphering these codes.

Ph.D. illiterates disdain simplicity of expression: the simpler the thought, the greater the exertions on behalf of obscurity or, if possible, total concealment. 'It's hard to measure X' becomes, in a journal devoted to social psychology, 'substantial measurement problems are encountered in evaluating X'. I'm afraid the same magazine would translate 'I love you' like so:

'The emotional intensity factors of my cognitive areas have been evaluated and the data permit the conclusion that your personality structure, and its continued proximity to my own, are of high quantitative value to my sustained happiness level rate.'

Now this sort of writing is code, as surely as if each letter of 'I love you' were replaced by its successor in the alphabet, making 'J mpwf zpv'. An honest code is respectable enough. What we can't have are all these closet cryptographers.

Unless we are at war or conversing among enemies, what justification can there be for codes or code-like writing? They waste our lives and our sacred energies. What excuse can there be for anything less than stark lucidity? When Ph.D. illiterates write codes, everyone else must expend a preponderance of strength on breaking those codes, and what little strength remains goes to absorbing the message and growing from it. You have certainly had that experience. Multiply your experience by millions and you can begin to assess the daily waste of a culture's most important natural resource, its intellectual energy.

THE CADILLAC SYNDROME

I'd like to suggest a new field of inquiry: the sociology of prose. Its chief question is: why does any group of people write as they do? Specifically, why do so many of our most learned, particularly in sociology and psychology, write so opaquely? One likely theory states that nouveau intellectuals – very much like the nouveau riche in feeling insecure about their rank in the community – will seek conspicuous proof of their arrival. To which one can only say: *how very tacky*.

From my vantage, however, Cadillac automobiles of even the most garish variety are far less injurious to the physical landscape than Cadillac prose is to the cultural landscape.

It would be only fair to apply the techniques perfected by sociologists to sociologists themselves, in the spirit of the injunction:

'Physician, heal thyself!' Perhaps some intrepid researcher, indifferent to a career, could send questionnaires to our sociologists and psychologists by way of prying into their education, class, cultural anxieties, misgivings about their fields and attainments therein. Perhaps the data would explain the inevitable fascination that the newer disciplines, and unsure minds, find in the most Philistine prose.

NOUNSPEAK

For many years I've been monitoring a fairly new aspect of English usage – the stringing together of two or three or four or more nouns. I've dubbed this practice Nounspeak and written about it at length in *Verbatim: The Language Quarterly* (February 1976). There I objected to Nounspeak's wordiness, abstraction, and lack of vigor. It is, of course, beloved by Ph.D. illiterates.

I read in PAW that Princeton students now talk about their 'grade point average' when everyone knows that 'grades' or 'average' says it all. A single sentence from *The Journal of Social Psychology* offers two exquisite examples of Nounspeak: 'This study investigates group conformity influence on member brand choice'. Just try to diagram that sentence.

I will speak here only of my more recent reflections on the subject. Nounspeak's most salient pretension is to precision and a sort of scientific solidity. Very often, however, it succeeds merely in introducing duplicities and confusions. A weatherman said that we should expect rain in 'the southern California area'. Is that identical with saying 'in southern California'? Or does the addition of the noun 'area' mean that Nevada and Mexico should also expect rain? The question is: what precisely did the speaker have in mind? The answer is: we don't know.

More and more these days people talk about 'problem areas' instead of simple old problems, which are really what we have to face. My first reaction was that the only sin lies in adding an extra word where it's not needed. Then I heard someone speak of 'solving a problem area'. And I thought: wait a minute – a problem is a thing, but a 'problem area' is a category of territory, if it's anything. Although you can certainly solve a problem, you cannot solve a category, because a category is an abstraction. In short, 'solving a problem area' may just be nonsense and not at all what the speaker meant.

A radio announcer said that Carter and his Cabinet were discussing 'policy goals'. And I thought: does that mean they discussed only the goals but not the policies themselves? What exactly is a 'policy goal'? Give an example.

This sort of analysis is tedious and rarely conclusive. But that's my point. Nounspcak leaves the gate open for debates that should not even be imaginable. Each extra noun carries along its own baggage. And then if you place them in uncertain juxtaposition to each other, you have more confusion than you want. The result is that we are pushed back one step further from life, rather than led into it, which is properly the aim of language.

'Value system' has, unfortunately, become a cliché. But what is this thing, a 'value system'? I don't have one in my life. I have values, surely, most of which don't fit together at all. 'Value hodgepodge' is more like it. Such is the case, I suggest, with you and yours, General Motors, and the American public. Look all year and you won't find a 'system'. Maybe 'value system' – that high-sounding theoretical abstraction – is in a class with 'round square'. You can mouth the words all you please, but that doesn't mean there is such a thing.

Nounspcak, like some pompous politicians, can look and sound impressive. But don't examine too closely. A phrase like 'group conformity influence' will start shimmering before your eyes.

THE FETTUCINI FACTOR

Language is not reality. Language points at reality. And it should point as directly as possible, like the pointer a lecturer uses to indicate cities on a map. Our problem is that our pointers are becoming wobbly.

Put this pointer on a table and push one end; the other end moves likewise. Now place a leather belt on the table and push one end; the other end moves only slightly and with little relation to the push. Now shove on a string of cooked spaghetti. The other end will ignore you.

In this image reality is doing the pushing. And the movement at the other end is the meaning that reaches your brain. The trouble with mushy language is that we no longer know what reality, if any, is being discussed. The language has ceased to point, has ceased to communicate any information about the hard push of reality.

In short, English becomes fettucini.

This image is intended to illustrate the real horror of Ph.D. illiteracy. Which is *not* that elaborately dense prose is an eyesore, an earsore, boring, hard to understand, and a blight on the intellectual community. No, the profoundly serious problem is that these people are wrecking our language, wrecking its ability to do its job. So that we now find English in the worst health of its long and fairly distinguished career.

THE METAPHYSICS OF PROSE

From what I know of linguistics and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, we create our language and our language creates us. What alarms me is that we seem to be creating a particularly sloppy and boneless language. And in turn we'll find that our thinking and talking and writing will become as spineless as jellyfish pulsing in shadowy seas. What better setting can there be for the sly propagation of unstated premises, unfounded theories, malicious nonsense, and outright lies?

And so we reach my fundamental point, which is, broadly put, political. I coined the word Nounspcak in respectful tribute to Orwell, who was so remarkably insightful about the relationship between a debased language and a debased civilization. The totalitarian state he depicted in *1984* required a shrunken language – so that its citizens could not think their way to a better society. Of Newspeak, the language of *1984*, Orwell wrote: 'It was designed not to extend but to diminish the range of thought'. So it is with Nounspcak (often) and Ph.D. illiteracy (generally).

A healthy, strong democracy requires a healthy, strong language. I think each of us has a responsibility – and the greater the education, the greater the responsibility – to protect and refine our language precisely because we may need it to save our skins.

Those who have little to say, or evil to hide, will seek the friendly camouflage of fog-bound language. But let those who are confident of their contribution speak clearly.

It is fatuous to talk ever so grandly of Spaceship Earth and then to retreat into piddling specialized illiteracies. Technology is not going to slow. Politics will remain in ferment. It is more crucial than ever that all the best and brightest minds speak lucidly to each other, educate each other, draw closer to one another. We need all the help we can give.