

Jargon and alienation: further generalisations

by A.G. Ulyatt

In my first article on this subject, I wrote:

If we persist in allowing jargon to proliferate, we are tacitly encouraging the alienation of man from man, of man from society, and, most important of all, of man from language. To allow this is to condone the disintegration of society.¹

Subsequently, I have come to believe that these generalisations have even wider implications, and it is these implications I shall be exploring here.

1

Let me begin by recalling some well-known points about man and language. Man is the only living creature to have found the necessity for and the means of creating language as a mode of communicating with others of his species. In passing, we should note that most of the continuing experiments designed to teach primates such as chimpanzees a 'language' have been founded on sign languages of various sorts:

Many social animals have some system of communication by signs and signals, but language is a species-specific, exclusive property of man.²

Since one must presume that the species-specific quality of man's ability to create and use language has an underlying if as yet unknown purpose, we may suggest that part of that purpose may be linked with man's evolutionary position. As Lord Adrian points out:

We are the biological group which has become capable of analysing and recording our experience by words and symbols and so we are, or should be, the spearhead of the evolutionary process. Mankind can still alter its character with successive generations because each can profit by the whole stock of past human endeavour stored in books, pictures or machines.³

The differentiating feature of man from other animals is expressed in another way by the poet, Edwin Muir, in these lines from a poem entitled 'The Animals':

They do not live in the world,
 Are not in time and space.
 From birth to death hurled
 No word do they have, not one
 To plant a foot upon,
 Were never in any place.

For with names the world was called
 Out of the empty air,
 With names was built and walled,
 Line and circle and square,
 Dust and emerald;
 Snatched from deceiving death
 By the articulate breath.⁴

Words act as signs. But Professor John Wilson has pointed out that

... almost anything can be successfully used as a sign, provided we agree about what its use is to be. It is our agreement about its use, and not the sign itself, which enables us to communicate. From this a very important conclusion follows: that signs do not have meaning in themselves, but only in relation to our agreement about their use.⁵

It follows that if we wish to communicate with our fellow men, we all must agree on the use of each sign or word we are using. But we tend to be irresponsible about language and the ways we use it. Professor E. R. Emmet says:

We take it [language] for granted and are therefore inclined to regard it as something which is in a sense given, just 'there', as the facts of nature are given and 'there'. And because we have had no hand ourselves in the formation and construction of this language we tend to lose sight of what is perhaps the most important thing about it, that we, mankind as a whole, invented and constructed the language and that we have the power collectively to change it as we will. We must never forget that we are or should be the masters, using the language as a tool for thinking and communication, and we must try very hard to understand, and if necessary to resist, the subtle influences that words and language in general are capable of exerting on the thoughts and emotions of mankind.⁶

The carelessness with which we use language engenders the perfect situation for the proliferation of jargon. Our thoughts and emotions are bludgeoned by slick if meaningless terminology.

Jargon functions largely through the misuse of language, punctuation, and so on. Simply stated, jargon is the unhealthy abuse of language, and in its abusive use of language lies its power.

Jargon flourishes in the areas of uncertainty where we have not achieved agreement about the use of words as signs; and our lack of agreement may be explained by the simultaneous existence of multiple meanings for one word. The problem is, in a word, connotation.

If we are to achieve precision in the use of any particular word, it follows that that word should have only *one* meaning so that agreement is inevitable and indisputable. Language should therefore be directed toward denotative precision rather than connotative ambiguities. Professor Suzanne K. Langer has written:

... denotation is the essence of language, because it frees the symbol from its original instinctive utterance and marks its deliberate *use*, outside of the total situation that gave it birth. A denotative word is related at once to a conception, which may be ever so vague, and to a *thing* (or event, quality, person, etc.) which is realistic and public; so it weans the conception away from the purely momentary and personal experience and fastens it on a permanent element which may enter into all sorts of situations.⁷

Because jargon requires a lack of specificity in order to function efficiently, it must position itself contrary to the denotative process and thus contrary to 'the essence of language'. The connotative use of words, however, has serious consequences:

In general the use of the same word to mean slightly different things is a frequent cause of fallacious arguments and often one which is by no means easy to detect.⁸

One crucial matter arises from the premise that denotative precision is the essential aim of language in the immediate future: the question of literature, of literary writing, and especially poetry. Without wishing to digress into large areas of critical debate, I would suggest that a 'poetic' register will evolve (as it did in medieval and Renaissance times) in which the literary or creative use of language assumes functions that are exceptions to, not manifestations of, denotative usage.

The use of one word with several varying meanings can, as Professor Emmet has already pointed out, produce fallacious arguments. The semantic instability of a word can also produce accidental confusion, or it may be deliberately exploited for

purposes such as deceit, delusion, or the inaccurate and biased recording of human experience.

Of course, one could argue that we need only consult a dictionary to have the meanings of any particular word available to us. But such a suggestion is invalid simply because the dictionary is a record of connotation and a measure of the extent to which agreement has *not* been possible for innumerable words.

Jargon promotes the connotative process actively, and often aggressively; it fosters greater and greater imprecision through public ignorance of acceptable usage. Frequent use of jargon terminology promotes acceptance — and confusion, as yet another slightly different meaning is attached to a word already in current use.

2

Some readers may feel that I am suggesting the elimination of one of the potential points of growth and change in language. This is not the case. Jargon is not a growth point in the evolution of language. It is a regressive process. In a letter addressed to the Right Honorable John, Lord Haughton (1681), John Dryden spoke of 'a dwarfish thought, dressed up in gigantic words', words which amply serve as a definition of jargon. Jargon is a regressive process because it encourages dwarfish thoughts in gigantic words; it passes off the mundane as the extraordinary; it makes unjustifiable claims; it debases the language it so ruthlessly exploits.

Man's hold on language is at best tenuous. He must do his utmost to strengthen his grip on, and control over, language, not simply to counter the insidious influences of jargon but also to assert his position as the spearhead of the evolutionary process.

It seems reasonable to assume that man has no need to evolve any further, physically, largely because of his ability to control his environment. Consequently, it seems reasonable to suggest that man's main — indeed, perhaps his *only* — potential for evolutionary development lies in the evolution of the mind. If man's evolutionary potential lies largely or wholly in mental evolution, it follows that he must have the means to record as minutely and as accurately as possible the evolution of the processes of the mind. The more he learns, the greater the demand for a precise language with which to convey that learning.

It is language that separates man from all other creatures. It is jargon that will force man into a barbaric state of mental atrophy. Man's evolutionary destiny depends at least in part on his ability to conceive of and communicate that destiny. Language is crucial to

the evolution of man, and jargon must not be allowed to undermine it:

I must ask your indulgence for so much law-making and speculation; but if the Creator had a purpose in equipping us with a neck, he surely meant us to stick it out.⁹

REFERENCES

- ¹ *English Usage in Southern Africa*, 7 (2), September 1976, p. 28.
- ² Arthur Koestler, *The Ghost in the Machine*. London: Picador, 1975, p. 19.
- ³ Lord Adrian, 'If Men Had Larger Brains', in Sir Julian Huxley et al., *The Destiny of Man*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1959, p. 45.
- ⁴ Edwin Muir, *Selected Poems* (edited by T.S. Eliot). London: Faber, 1965, p. 73.
- ⁵ John Wilson, *Language & the Pursuit of Truth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956, pp. 14–15.
- ⁶ E.R. Emmet, *Learning to Philosophize*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1968, pp. 21–2.
- ⁷ Suzanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: a Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 3rd edition, 1973, pp. 133–4.
- ⁸ Emmet, p. 40.
- ⁹ Arthur Koestler, 'Literature & the Law of Diminishing Returns'. *Encounter*, XXXIV(5), May 1970, 38–45.

[We plan to issue further lists of jargon and 'vogue words' in future issues. See also the *Index* in this issue.]