

Jargon and alienation : some sweeping generalisations

by A.G. Ulliyatt

I should like to begin by offering for consideration two quotations because it is upon two propositions expressed in them that the basic premise of my argument rests. The first is by Professor Nelson Francis:

At any given moment, the identity of a language is the sum total of the speaking habits of all the people who use it. But these habits change from year to year, even from day to day, and therefore the language also changes. But the people still know they are speaking 'the same language'. Its identity persists in spite of change through generations. After a while the accumulated changes may become so great that it almost seems like a wholly new language. But the continuity is such that very few people are aware of the changes that occur even in their own speech from year to year. During the fifteen hundred or so years of its recorded history, English has changed so greatly that its earliest form is unintelligible to modern speakers of English. But at no time was the language of the father unintelligible to the son.¹

The second extract is by Professor Alvin Toffler:

There was a time when a man learned the language of his society and made use of it, with little change, throughout his lifetime. His 'relationship' with each learned word ... was durable. Today, to an astonishing degree, it is not.²

If the identity of a language is the sum total of the speaking habits of all the people who use it, and if man is no longer capable of a durable relationship with language, then we have to face the disturbing proposition that language is losing its identity with increasing rapidity while men are equally quickly losing the ability to communicate with one another. In other words, man is

becoming alienated from his fellows because he is becoming alienated from his language.

There are many causes of this increasing inability to communicate, but it is my contention that the most significant — and the one with which I am concerned here — is jargon. Jargon may be defined as the process of rephrasing ordinary observations, perceptions, thoughts and ideas *for which an efficient and precise vocabulary already exists* in ways which suggest that something more complex or profound than the obvious is being conveyed. By this process, even the most banal of platitudes can be made to acquire an unmerited 'significance', chiefly through ostentatious or pretentious terminology.

Why is it that many people find it necessary to resort to jargon? As is the case with most questions of human behaviour, the answer is complex, but I shall try to make some rather sweeping generalisations for the sake of brevity.

In modern society, many influences are at work, independently or conjointly, to threaten the security of the individual. Various pressures and tensions serve to deflate his ego, to challenge his individuality, and almost as an automatic defence reaction produce a desire to have his ego boosted. Such a need is however, a confession of psychological inadequacy, an inability to accept the realities of life. Because of this psychological weakness, perpetrators of jargon tend to associate with other equally flabby egos, and so form a group. Once the group has been established, there is a tendency among its members to try to regularise within manageable bounds the group's behaviour and, more importantly, its language. Within such a regularised group of society, its insistence on conformity provides a strong sense of security. At the same time, because each group wishes to be assured of its own sense of uniqueness, certain modes of behaviour (including the use of certain types of language) are created to ensure for the group a sense of individuality, even if that individuality is patently false. Group members come to communicate in a mode of language peculiar to their society, in this way boosting their egos and deluding themselves with an artificially created sense of security.

Let me offer a concrete example. In what may be termed 'specialist agencies', that is, groups of people who possess a more-than-average knowledge of a limited but specialised field, mundane matters are rephrased in a peculiarly 'specialist' language so that the non-specialist, the non-group member, is

deliberately deluded by garbled but impressive phraseology: 'There's disjunction between the output source and the operative mechanisms and that will necessitate a new connective system complete with interlock devices.' To say 'The wire's broken so you'll need a new one with a plug' is much simpler, more precise but much less satisfying to the perpetrator of jargon because it deprives him of his security and does not inflate his ego.

A similar tendency for over-blown phrasing exists in the world of commerce where this type of monstrosity proliferates: 'So-and-so is no longer temporarily disemployed as he has been repositioned within a viable context in the work situation as a pre-owned transportation redistribution consultant.' If delivered with the necessary verve and audacity, this sentence may sound very grand and delude the listener into believing that something far beyond his ken has been said.

In the present day, even intellectuals and academics find themselves in an awkward position:

With ever-increasing specialization, fewer highly-educated people have a whole view of life, or observations on life as a whole, to communicate. Nor does the intellectual find it easy to communicate to the general public anything from his special field of study. The restricted range and esoteric idiom of modern scholarship are a barrier to communication which — as some laudable examples show — needs determined effort to break through. Moreover the scholar who tries to 'popularize' his subject is unlikely to arouse the enthusiasm of his academic colleagues.³

Indeed, some academic disciplines are guilty of developing and perpetuating confusing and meaninglessly inflated terminology to disguise simple statements:

If we construct a specific conceptual matrix representing the mother-child dyad, it will be possible to demonstrate that the dyadic interface is congruent with our expectation for a bilateral kinship which operates multi-directionally between both components.⁴

In its simplest form, this means that the mother and child have a relationship which works at a number of levels.

Quite frequently, academic jargon conveys no message or information yet, because of certain words and phrases, it *seems* to

be stating the ineffable, and this misleads others (and us) into thinking that something profound has been said. By deliberately choosing an inappropriate metaphor, for example, it is possible to create the impression that we are managing to state imponderables. In literary criticism, many analogies are drawn from other disciplines, notably (and quite incongruously) from physics and chemistry. We write of 'nodes of interaction'; we see 'organic development'; we analyse 'the elements' of a passage; we measure lines of poetry in 'feet'; and we confuse everybody. By indulging in inaccurate or inappropriate terms, we perpetrate another form of alienation. We are becoming alienated ourselves, from our own individuality. As Ronald Laing puts it, 'a man can estrange himself from himself by mystifying himself and others'.⁵

To a large extent, this process of mystifying ourselves and others is due to the sense of inadequacy brought about in recent years by an over-emphasis on the value of specialisation. And although specialisation actively promotes alienation because of the esoteric nature of academic jargon, society not only condones but encourages specialisation. The reason is not hard to find:

There are forms of alienation that are relatively strange to statistically 'normal' forms of alienation. The 'normally' alienated person, by reason of the fact that he acts more or less like everyone else, is taken to be sane. Other forms of alienation that are out of step with the prevailing state of alienation are those that are labelled by the 'normal' majority as bad or mad.⁶

Only individuals with holistic conceptions of life are able to withstand the absurd, imbalanced, possibly schizoid pressures of society, and the majority adopt an appropriately 'normal' attitude of quiet acquiescence. They begin to accept, even to use, phraseology which they know to be jargon, yet they dare not oppose it for fear of being labelled 'bad' or worse still, 'mad'. Their own insecurity prevents them, and individuals with holistic concepts of life usually find themselves isolated in the limbo reserved for those who cannot conform to society's normal state of alienation.

The apparently insignificant question of jargon has, therefore, far-reaching implications for society and for the individual. Despite the enormous number of people being educated by 'normal' society, fewer and fewer are able to communicate effectively and unpretentiously at consistently demanding

intellectual levels. This is not snobbery. It is a painful fact. Many people resort to jargon in an attempt to disguise their own verbal and psychological inadequacies, yet it is their very use of jargon which betrays their inability to communicate effectively as whole individuals with a sufficiently developed holistic view of life.

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.

REFERENCES

- ¹ W. Nelson Francis, *The History of English*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1963, p. 2.
- ² Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock*. London: Pan Books, 1971, p. 162.
- ³ M.V.C. Jeffreys, *Personal Values in the Modern World*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1962, p. 94.
- ⁴ I am grateful to my colleague, Mr I.A. Rabinowitz, for this example and for some of the ideas expressed in the next two paragraphs.
- ⁵ R.W. Laing, *The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1967, p. 25.
- ⁶ Laing, p. 24.