

This is called gobbling the gook



by Fleur de Villiers

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Let us raise a flag for the four-letter words. No, not the ones that would send shock waves rippling through the lower reaches of Upper Houghton and have the local censor reaching for his blue pencil, but those that, in a time of verbal inflation, have become rarer than a half-cent in a supermarket.

Or, as you finalise arrangements to maximise your family's meaningful participation in Sunday's leisure-time activity, are you too busy – or confused – to shed a tear for the death of words like life, love, hate, kill and play?

My train of thought was prompted by the tale from the United States this week about a man who received a sheaf of papers with the daunting inscription: "Terminal behaviour objectives for continuous progression modules in early childhood".

It was the early childhood that gave the game away. It was not a highly classified document from the Houston Space Centre – where they understand language like this. It was his son's school report.

Pik Botha

Down in the depths of this gobbledygook jungle something stirred. Americans might be past masters of the modern euphemism – that arcane art of communicating the minimum meaning in the maximum number of words – but South Africans are showing themselves to be willing pupils.

About the same time, as I was puzzling over what terminal behaviour objectives had to do with a child's ability to add two and two and make five, Mr Pik Botha was telling the world that "successes so far in the detente exercise in Africa are all plus factors".

Now, I'm sure that sentence did what it was meant to do and made us all feel good, and I'm glad that Mr Botha, after only one brief stay in New York, can show such a natural aptitude for the American idiom.

All I hope – for his own political future – is that when he returns from his stint as South African Ambassador to Washington, he will still be able to communicate at strydda with the good people of Wonderboom.

Meanwhile, if he wants an advanced course in the subtleties of not telling it like it is, he could have no better mentor than Mr Ronald Ziegler, Nixon's Press Secretary who, when asked to inform the Press that a White House lawyer needed time to think about a certain issue, came up with this gem: The lawyer, he said, was going to evaluate and make a judgment in terms of response.

It was also Mr Ziegler who, in the best George Washington tradition, never told a lie – he merely described all previous statements as "inoperative".

Mr Ziegler, of course, like all the ex-President's men, came from the world of advertising, where communication is the watchword and words are constantly watched to ensure that they don't communicate.

Couple this fear of the explicit with the belief that if anything is worth saying, it's worth at least a dozen syllables, and you have the modern Victorianism which delicately demands that we clothe our actions from neck to ankle in verbal furbelows and frills.

Would we – except in the private bedroom of our own thoughts – ever dare to "end" something instead of finalise it; say "now" instead of at this point in time; grow, instead of escalate; talk, instead of "conduct a dialogue"?

Meanwhile, as we decide that the economic slowdown is in fact accelerating, and that certain decisions will have to become operative if we are to achieve broad market penetration and maximise our profits, perhaps we might find time to bury decently the four-letter word and, with it, English as she once was spoke, but which today makes things too painfully clear for speech.

Inoperative

Then – as the only viable alternative – we can go on happily creating our new platform for dialogue, always remembering that it no longer matters what you say as long as you make quite, quite sure that no one understands you properly.

And just in case you think you have understood me – everything I have just said is inoperative.

It's nice to know that in this world of maximised words and minimum meanings, someone still understands the value of understatement. Like the Transvaal policeman who this week described the actions of a man who allegedly punched, kicked and swore at the police, fired four shots and then, as a grand finale, jumped up and down on the police car's roof.

“He was obviously upset about something”, said Colonel Smith.

I wonder how he knew?