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Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to
narrow the range of thought?

George Orwell,

1984

Language most shows a man: speak that I may see thee.

Ben Jonson

A great ox stands on my tongue.

Aeschylus,

Agamemnon



Introduction

Over the coming twelve months we will be enhancing our product offering to bring you new features and access to innovative funds. You can be confident that our commitment is resolute, to make changes that investor's (sic) value.

Insurance company newsletter

PUBLIC LANGUAGE CONFRONTS MOST of us every day of our lives, but rarely when we are with friends or family. Not yet, at least. It is not the language in which we address lovers, postmen, children or pets. So far.

True, in the households of young professionals they will say sometimes that the new dog *adds alpha to their lifestyle*; that they need *closure* with their orthodontist or mother; that they are *empowered* by their Nikes. There is seepage from the public to the private. But that's all it is. *At this point in time.*

Public language is the language of public life: the language of political and business leaders and civil servants – official, formal, sometimes elevated language. It is the language of leaders more than the led, the managers rather than the managed. It takes very different forms: from shapely rhetoric to shapeless, enervating sludge; but in every case it is the language of power and influence. What our duties are, for whom we should vote,

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which mobile phone plan we should take up: in all these places the public language rules. As power and influence are pervasive so is the language: we hear and read it at the highest levels and the lowest. And while it begins with the powerful, the weak are often obliged to speak it, imitate it. 'Even politicians speak/truths of value to the weak', Auden said. Believing as they do that everyone needs something even if they don't know it, marketing people would agree.

The influence of marketing shows itself in advertising and commerce, where we would expect to find it, and in politics and war, where its presence might surprise us. Marketing goes wherever the media goes and the media goes pretty well everywhere. Naturally the language goes too, which is why all kinds of institutions cannot pass on the simplest information about their services without also telling us that they are *contemporary, innovative and forward-looking* and *committed to continuous improvement*, as if the decision to raise their rates or change their phone number can only be grasped in this *context-sensitive* way. To help us all get going in the same direction they might give the context a name, like *Growing Victoria Together* or *Business Line Plus*, or *Operation Decapitation* where the service is a military one.

Managerialism, a name for various doctrines of business organisation, also comes with a language of its own, and to such unlikely places as politics and education. Even if the organisational principles of management or marketing were so widely appropriate, it is by no means certain that their language is. Marketing, for instance, has no particular concern with truth. Management concerns are relatively narrow – relative, that is, to life, knowledge

and possibility. This alone makes marketing and managerial language less than ideal for a democracy or a college. In addition their language lacks almost everything needed to put in words an opinion or an emotion; to explain the complex, paradoxical or uncertain; to tell a joke. If those who propagate this muck really believed in being *context-sensitive*, they would understand that in the context of ordinary human need and sensibility their language is extraordinarily *insensitive*. It enrages, depresses, humiliates, confuses. It leaves us speechless.

'Public language that defies normal understanding is, as Primo Levi wrote, 'an ancient repressive artifice, known to all churches, the typical vice of our political class, the foundation of all colonial empires'. They will tell you it is in the interests of leadership, management, efficiency, *stakeholders*, the *bottom line* or some democratic imperative, but the public language remains the language of power. It has its origins in the subjection or control of one by another. In all societies, 'To take power is to win speech'. Whatever its appearance, intimidation and manipulation come as naturally to public language as polite instruction, information and enlightenment. That is why vigilance is needed: an argument concerning the public language is an argument concerning liberty.

To Levi's list of obfuscating types we could add many sociologists and deconstructionists, including some who design school curricula and courses with the word 'Studies' in them. The politically correct might have a case to answer for years of philistine abuse (often, strangely, in the name of cultures), had the Prime Minister not abolished them. We are now all free, he says, to speak our minds; but the language continues to

decay, which rather lets political correctness off the hook. Political correctness and its equally irritating twin, anti-political correctness; economic rationalism; dope-smoking; Knowledge Management – wherever cults exist the language inclines to the arcane or inscrutable. This is no bad thing of itself, but obnoxious in a democratic or educational environment. Among Druids, Masons or economists we expect the language to be unfathomable or at least unclear or strange. They speak in code. This can only be because they do not want us to understand, or do not themselves understand, or are so in the habit of speaking this way they have lost the ability to communicate normally. When we hear this sort of language it is, therefore, common sense to assume there is a cult, or something like a cult, in the vicinity. And be alert, if not alarmed.

While English spreads across the globe, the language itself is shrinking. Vast numbers of new words enter it every year, but our children's and leaders' vocabularies are getting smaller. Latin and Greek have been squeezed out of most journalists' English and 'obscure' words are forbidden unless they qualify as economic or business jargon. You write for your audience and your audience knows fewer words than it used to and hasn't time to look up unfamiliar ones. The language of politics is tuned to the same audience and uses the same media to reach it, so it too diminishes year by year. *Downsized*, business would say. Business language is a desert. Like a public company, the public language is being trimmed of excess and subtlety; what it doesn't need is shed, what is useful is reorganised, *prioritised* and attached either to new words or to old ones stripped of meaning. In business, language is now *productivity-driven*.

What of the media whose words we read and hear every day? The code of conduct of the International Federation of Journalists is categorical: 'Respect for the truth and the right of the public to truth is the first duty of the journalist.' There can be no respect for the truth without respect for the language. Only when language is alive does truth have a chance. As the powerful in legend turn the weak or the vanquished into stone, they turn us to stone through language. This is the essential function of a cliché, and of cant and jargon; to neutralise expression and 'vanish memory'. They are dead words. They will not do for truth.

Therefore, to live according to their code, journalists must choose their own words carefully and skilfully and insist that others do the same. The proper relationship of journalists to the public language is that of unrelenting critics. It is their duty to see through it. But we cannot rely on them. Norman Mailer once wrote on behalf of writers like himself that 'the average reporter could not get a sentence straight if it were phrased more subtly than his own mind could make phrases'. They munched nuances 'like peanuts', he said. True, it happens and it's maddening, but inadequate prose is still journalism and roughly meets the requirements of the code. It is something else, however, when journalists ignore abuses of the public language by people of influence and power, and reproduce without comment words that are intended to deceive and manipulate. When this happens journalism ceases to be journalism and becomes a kind of propaganda; or a reflection of what Simone Weil called 'the superb indifference that the powerful have for the weak'.

The war in Iraq provided a case in point. The military provided brand names – *Shock and Awe*, for instance – and much of the media could see nothing but to use them. Each day of the campaign the media were briefed in the language of the Pentagon’s media relations people, whereupon very often the journalists briefed their audiences in the same language. The media centre in Doha was always *on message*, and so was the media. When the military said they had *degraded* by 70 per cent a body of Iraqi soldiers, this was what the media reported. Few said ‘killed’ and only the Iraqi Minister for Information in his daily self-satire said ‘slaughtered’, which was a more honest word but a blatant lie because he said it of American soldiers, not Iraqi ones. One journalist, who knew something about the effects of Daisy Cutter bombs, said ‘pureed’. And no one showed any pictures of the bodies. To be *embedded* with the Coalition forces was to be *embedded* in their language and their *message*. It turned out that *embedded* just meant ‘in bed with’ in the old language. If they said they had *attrited* an enemy force, generally that was what the media conveyed, and it was the same if they said *deconflicted*. All this was a sad retreat from both the journalists’ code of conduct and the noble achievements of twentieth-century war reporting. Just as significant was the way these words spoke for the willingness of journalists to join the military in denying the common humanity of ordinary soldiers – especially the largely conscripted cannon fodder – on the opposing side. Here was another retreat: from war reporting standards going back to Homer.

The public language will only lift in tone and clarity when those who write and speak it take words seriously

again. They need to tune their ears to it. Awareness is the only defence against the creeping plague of which this is a microscopic specimen. *The inquiry may allow for relevant businesses or industries to be identified and for investigation into the possibility that certain regional or rural areas of the state would be more affected than others.* No doubt in the place from which these words came they were judged competent. But they are not competent in the world at large. They are not competent as language. They represent an example of what George Orwell described as anaesthetic writing. You cannot read it without losing some degree of consciousness. You come to, and read it again, and still your brain will not reveal the meaning – will not even try. You are getting sleepy again. Read aloud, in a speech for instance, an audience hears the words as they might hear a plane passing overhead or a television in another room. We can easily make it sound less like a distant aeroplane by the simple expedient of saying it as if we mean it: *The inquiry will decide which businesses are relevant and which parts of the state will be badly affected.* In fact, to guess at the intended meaning, it might come down to *the Inquiry deciding which businesses and which parts of the state will be most affected.*

Of course, it’s just one sentence. But we have to begin somewhere.

We must keep it in perspective of course. The decay or near death of language is not life threatening. It can be an aid to crime and tragedy; it can give us the reasons for unreasoning behaviour, including war and genocide and even famine. Words are deadly. Words are bullets. But a word is not a Weapon of Mass Destruction, or a jihad, or

unhappiness. Like a rock, it is not a weapon (or a grinding stone) until someone picks it up and uses it as one. We should not get cranky or obsessive about words. You can't eat them, or buy things with them, or protect your borders with them, and it will not do to make a great display of your concern. There are more important things to think about than what we say or how we say it.

In any case resistance is probably futile: as futile as the Luddites' resistance was futile. Managerial language may well be to the information age what the machine and the assembly line was to the industrial. It is mechanised language. Like a machine, it removes the need for thinking: this essential and uniquely human faculty is suspended along with all memory of what feeling, need or notion inspired the thing in the first place. To the extent that it is moulded and constrained by opinion polls and media spin, modern political language is the cousin of the managerial and just as alienating. To speak or be spoken to in either variety is to be 'not in this world'.

Bear in mind just the same that if we deface the War Memorial or rampage through St Paul's with a sledgehammer we will be locked up as criminals or lunatics. We can expect the same treatment if we release some noxious weed or insect into the natural environment. It is right that the culture and environment should be so respected. Yet every day we vandalise the language, which is the foundation, the frame and joinery of the culture, if not its greatest glory, and there is no penalty and no way to impose one. We can only be indignant. And we should resist.



Wheresoever manners and fashions
are corrupted, language is. It imitates
the public riot.

Ben Jonson

PARROTS, WHEN THEY ARE separated from their flocks, know by instinct that they must quickly join another one or they will make a meal for hawks. It is from this understanding that their mimetic skill derives. On finding any other horde they try to blend by mimicking its members. They do as the Romans do. If it is a Catholic household in which they find themselves, they might recite Hail Marys. Among blasphemers, they'll blaspheme. Where it is customary to curse the dog or tap the barometer, they curse the dog or tap the barometer. Whatever is most frequently repeated sounds to them definitive, and this is the one they imitate. Every day for forty years, regardless of the context, a bird might screech, 'Don't forget your hat!' or shout 'Oh What a Feeling!' all day long, much as advertisers do. Parrots never learn the language, but are smart enough to know, like people involved in marketing, that one or two catch phrases will satisfy most people.

Our language grows, mutates and ossifies in a similar way. We are all inclined to imitate the sounds we hear. Fashion dictates many words and phrases. In foreign countries we pick up accents and inflections. We tune ourselves to the cadences of unfamiliar dining rooms. Politicians go amongst the people primed with local knowledge and saying 'Giddy' or 'How do you do', according to the prevailing custom. Priests murmur Latin phrases that are full of meaning even to their non-Latin-speaking flocks. Street gangs, sports clubs, political parties, families, people who for all kinds of reasons are regularly together, naturally develop a vernacular as a kind of bonding and those who want to join must learn it. Ideologues speak in language best understood by ideologues of like mind: it is called 'preaching to the converted' and it is probably a species of narcissism, like a budgerigar talking to itself in a mirror.

Organisations frequently impose a language of a certain shape on members and employees. Military forces seem to have done it always, and now companies imitate the military example, and all kinds of other outfits imitate the companies. Politics got slogans from military battalions – the word 'slogan' comes from the Gaelic and literally means a battle cry. No sooner were there slogans in politics than there were also 'weasel words': sly words that do not mean what they appear to, or have an unseen purpose. To be involved with politics is to make a pact with the devil, Max Weber said. Should we then expect the language of politics to have something diabolical about it? And if politicians can't resist temptation, why should advertising and marketing? Why should companies? The company is a miracle of the modern world:

... the
establishment of a
comprehensive
feedback process
industry at the
national,
State / Territory,
and regional levels
to inform the
continuous
improvement of the
Training Packages in
future iterations ...
Australian Government

The soul was not
made to dwell in a
thing: and when
forced to it, there is
no part of that soul
but suffers violence.

Simone Weil,
'The Iliad, Poem
of Might'

in fact it is almost true to say that the limited liability company was the beginning of the modern age. The point at which the age becomes *postmodern* is marked, perhaps, by companies taking their liability for the language to be limited.

The English language has always been prey to fashion, and on the evidence so far we should not fear for its survival. Fashions come and go, but the language moves on, taking with it whatever remains useful or interesting, discarding what is colourless or vain. The language has proved much stronger than any human attempt to contain it: Samuel Johnson and, on the other side of the Atlantic, Noah Webster, both tried to tie it down and both failed magnificently. Waves of grammarians have followed them. There have always been people to declare that this or that is the only definition of a word, and this is the only way to pronounce it; this is the only way to arrange a sentence and this the only way punctuate it. These people are essential, but only in the way that lifeboats are to an ocean liner.

The historical view suggests we can relax. English has survived everything that's been thrown at it: political and social revolution, industrial and technological revolutions, colonialism and post-colonialism, mass education, mass media, mass society. More than just surviving these upheavals, it adapts and grows, is strengthened and enriched by them. And never has it grown more than now: by one estimate, at the rate of more than 20,000 words a year, and for every new word several old ones change their meanings or sprout additional ones. It is wondrous on this level.

And yet, as it grows it is depleting. In the information age the public language is coming down to an ugly, subliterate universal form with a fraction of the richness that living English has. Relative to the potential of language, the new form approximates a parrot's usage. It is cliché-ridden and lacks meaning, energy, imagery and rhythm. It also lacks words. It struggles to express the human. Buzz words abound in it. Platitudes iron it flat. The language is hostile to communion, which is the purpose of language. It cannot touch provenance. It stifles reason, imagination and the promise of truth. Look at a block of 1960s Housing Commission flats and you have the shape and dysfunction of it. Listen and you can hear the echoes of authoritarian cant. Our public language is becoming a non-language. Errors of grammar are irritating; slovenly, colloquial or hybrid speech can be gruesome; but English also gets much of its vigour and resilience from spontaneous invention and the colonial cultural mix. Compared to the general malaise, even the language of the law is harmless and at least amuses those who practise it. These are to the language as a few biting insects are to the tsetse

fly: as an itch is to a slow, sleeping death.

The cage fell off, the parrot took fright and cried out:

'Pre-sent arms!'

Turgenev, *Yakov Pasyukov*

'We are demotivated', said Sergeant Chris Grisham, a military intelligence officer.

News report from Iraq

There have been signs of decay in the language of politics and academia for years, but the direst symptoms are in business; and the curse has spread through the pursuit of business models in places that were never businesses. Universities that once valued and defended culture have swallowed the creed whole. Libraries, galleries and museums, banks and welfare agencies now parrot it. The public sector spouts it as loudly as the private does. It is the language of all levels of government including the very local. They speak of *focus-ing on the delivery of outputs* and matching decisions to *strategic initiatives*. Almost invariably these *strategic initiatives* are *key* strategic initiatives. In this language, schools, bank branches and libraries are closed down. In an education curriculum or the mission statement of an international fast food chain you will hear the same phrases. Military leaders while actually conducting wars sound like marketing gurus, and

politicians sound like both of them. If one day in the finance pages you encounter *critical deliverables*, do not be surprised if it turns up the next day when you're listening to the football. The public language has all these variants and all of them are infected, if not dead. It is the grey death of the globalised world.

Those in the vanguard seem determined to create a new language for the new times they are bringing into being: new words to describe the new machinery, new words for the new processes, new words for leadership and management, new words to measure value and priority, new words to govern behaviour; slogans to live our lives by. Inevitably, those who follow the business model follow their lead in language: and while it is partly to imitate, to impress or to melt into the milieu, it is also because this is the language in which they are taught. It is part of the package.

In this revolution we are encouraged to take up the new, like those chimps who took up fire millions of years ago. We learn the laws of the free market as an earlier generation learned the laws of selection: that we must be competitive, that the adaptable survive and the rest are swallowed up. We are so thoroughly persuaded that everything depends on adapting to the new, we are letting go of the language for no better reason than that it is very old.

Consider these two sentences. They are not the worst specimens ever seen, but they are typical of the kind. The writer seeks applications for a job in marketing.

Due to the nature of our industry and also the breadth of our core business offering, we have a large list

of blue chip clients. Cocky Marketing has a unique positioning in the Australian market place and intends to grow upon this in the coming years.

The successful applicant, the advertisement continues, will possess *an eye for detail, ability to multi-task, creativity, confident ability to communicate, amicable (sic) personality and ability to drive manual vehicle*. The language could lead us to wonder if the person advertising does not lack at least the first four skills. Yet the people who respond to the advertisement are not likely to notice any shortcomings. This kind of writing is now endemic: it is learned, practised, expected, demanded. It is writing of the kind George Orwell said was tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated henhouse.

Grammar is not the problem. To work on the grammar is like treating a man's dandruff when he has

A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. The point is that the process is reversible. Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step toward political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers.

George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language*

gangrene. The thing is systemically ill. It does not respond to any form of massage or manipulation. You try surgery and when you've finished there's more on the floor than on the table. Look again and you realise it has been a corpse all along. It is composed entirely of dead matter, except perhaps for the bit about the *blue chip clients*, whatever they are. Leave it at – *We have a large list of blue chip clients and (if you must) a unique position (no ing) in the Australian market place* – and this simple sentence looks almost heroic. It might be hogwash, but it's plainer hogwash and it doesn't turn to fog the instant it makes contact with a reader's brain.

You will see writing of this kind wherever the influence of marketing and managerialism has seeped, which is to say pretty well everywhere. It is the language of both private and public sectors, of McDonald's, your financial institution, your library, your local member, your national intelligence organisation. It comes through your door and down your phone: in letters from public utilities, government departments, local councils, your children's school, banks, insurance companies and telephone companies, all of them telling you that their main purpose is to *better address outcomes for all our customers to better achieve our goals*. It will be put before you in PowerPoint presentations; it will blurt across your computer screen – sometimes with a friend's name and email address at the bottom. Sometimes you will see that you have written it yourself. At any moment of the working day the screen might remind you that you are employed to *validate logic models for assigning accountabilities*. In hybrid forms, it issues from the mouths of commanders of armies and leaders of nations, as if to say that in our advanced societies, government and

And the Lord said,
Behold, the people
is one, and they have
all one language;
and this they begin
to do: and now
nothing will be
restrained from
them, which they
have imagined to do.

Go to, let us go
down, and there
confound their
language, that they
may not understand
one another's
speech . . .

Genesis 11:6-9

Prefer geniality to
grammar.
Henry Watson Fowler and
Francis George Fowler,
The King's English

war, like all other enterprises, come down to marketing or marketing *events*. We may be sure that in certain influential quarters there are people who believe that this is why we are so advanced.

This blurring of the corporate (or managerial) with more traditional (or primitive) human activity creates confusing environments for players. Just as a parrot might screech all day for half a century, 'Where's my other sock?', as if socks mattered to a bird, a politician will now talk about promises being *core* and *non-core* as if these business categories mattered to a promise. In the same way, teenage basketballers are told to be *accountable* as if they were global corporations. Footballers and cricketers are also told to be *accountable*, and in post-match interviews declare that because they were they won. So far no one has been heard to say that they played *transparent* football, but in May this year a South Australian football commentator told the listening public that *the bottom line* of entering the forward line was *validation by the leg*. And it probably is, *at the end of the day*.

It is likely that nothing attempted outside the corporate world can change what is happening to the language within it. The management revolution will continue, the corporation will continue to evolve and the language will evolve with it. The relationship is systemic. Management language has been changing ever since the first stage of the 'management revolution' in the 1930s when managers started to be more important than proprietors, control more important than ownership. Billy Wilder's 1960 film, *The Apartment*, was in part a satire on the command and control structure of management and the language that went with it. Company employee, Jack Lemmon, tacks *wise* on to every second word – *company-wise*, *control-wise*, *lending your apartment to your superiors to have affairs in-wise*. No one works or talks like that any more. They say *in respect of*, *in regard to*, and *in terms of*.

The change is foreseen in another masterpiece of those years, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. The principal of Lolita's school tells Humbert Humbert:

. . . we are more interested in communication than composition. That is, with due respect to Shakespeare and others, we want our girls to *communicate* freely with the live world around them rather than plunge into musty old books . . . We think, Dr Humbert, in organismal and organisational terms . . . What do we mean by education? . . . we live not only in a world of thoughts but a world of things . . . Words without experience are meaningless.

While most discussions of knowledge management have treated commitment as a binary variable, underlying theory suggests otherwise. Commitment can be better represented in terms of a continuum ranging from negligible or partial commitment to the KMS, and from avoidance (non use) to meagre and unenthusiastic use (compliant use) to skilled, enthusiastic and consistent use (committed use) of the KMS).

Yogesh Malhotra (*Syracuse University of Management*)
and Dennis F. Galletta
(*Joseph M. Kratz Graduate School of Business*) 'Role of Commitment and Motivation in Knowledge Management Systems Implementation: Theory, Conceptualisation, and Measurement of Antecedents of Success'

The Principal's principles are those of the modern manager and communications teacher. He wanted to leave out of Lolita's education what they leave out: namely, the human mind – the thing that arrives at meaning through language and will not, without coercion or deceit, reduce to a cog in a machine or an item of organisation. Nabokov's Principal has triumphed absolutely.

In today's *leading edge* companies, *networks* have replaced the vertical hierarchies of forty years ago; directives have given way to *communications* within and between the *networks*. This new model, we are told, makes for much faster decision-making, essential in modern global companies built around products, customers and geography: so much faster that managers are *nodes*. *Communications* bounce off these nodes in *horizontal flows* across *silos*. Nodes are 'what it is all about', the experts say: *nodes* and *networking between silos*. The essential difference between *leading edge* companies now, and companies in the days of *The Apartment*, is that in

the old days only the top end of the hierarchy had daily need of communicating: now, just about everyone in the company does. In the company, as at Lolita's school, people do not talk about language, or English or grammar or expression – they talk about *Communications*.

This is a radical change. The new model, a McKinsey's heavyweight tells us, 'should liberate the company from the past'. Certainly it liberates the company from the language of the past, which means a lot of people are liberated from the language of their parents; much as the inhabitants of Babel were liberated by God when He confounded them. Judging an employee's performance, for example, comes down to this:

The role of the corporate centre is to worry about talent and how people do relative to each other. Workers build a set of intangibles around who they are. If they are not appreciated for their value-added they will go somewhere else.

Ask yourself: would you stay if your *value-added* was not appreciated?

The global company is the spearhead and exemplar of management change. We can presume that it will become, if it is not already, the *paradigm*, the *benchmark*, *world's best practice*, the *KPI* (*key performance indicator*) of all KPIs; which means within a year or two your football club will imitate it, as presently they imitate the fashion for *paradigms*, *benchmarks*, *KPIs* and (seriously, they have been heard to say it) *best practice*. It's all fashion, of course, and fashion is imitation. Wherever modern management goes, however, the fashion for networking makes imitation

Once on paper, words assume a horrifying concreteness. All the beautiful fluidity of thought is gone, replaced by rows of squalid and humourless squiggles. Yet these squiggles (this is the horrifying part) have somehow become 'your idea' . . . 'If you want your idea to get better', they seem to say, 'you will have to deal with us.' But you are already realising as you stare at them, that your idea is utterly vapid – and you haven't even had it yet.

Louis Menand,
New Yorker

compulsory. Communication is the primary purpose of the networks. Everyone in the networks communicates in the same language, everyone thinks in it, and no one, it seems, thinks about anything else: except of course if their *value-added* has been noticed relative to other network members, which does make it possible that business is not the only thing going on in these *silos*. A little ambition, a little envy, a little of the kind of thing that went on in the dark ages of *The Apartment*. We can hope.

Schools of communications have appeared all over the globe and manuals of communication skills proliferate to feed them. Some of these manuals make the point that people teaching communications are often the hardest people on earth to understand, that schools of communications are the worst places for jargon. The better manuals are models of clarity, and clarity is what they want their readers to achieve. They stress short sentences, the active voice, nouns and verbs without adjectives and adverbs fending for them: simplicity, directness. Jargon they properly

despise. Structuralism, poststructuralism, postmodernism and other fashionable academic theories are put to the torch; along with similes, metaphors and figures of speech in general. (There goes the torch.)

Comfortingly Orwellian as this may sound, it is also a bit silly. If theory is incomprehensible it is useless: and, if it defies comprehension, a description of a sunset or a centaur is also useless. True, theory is more likely to be incomprehensible than description, but much theory is more useful and stimulating. For instance, it can help us see that if latter day Orwellians think language is just a matter of matching the right words to the right things, they are wrong. At best the idea represents a worthy ambition: at worst it's as fanciful as any 'theory' ever was, and a doctrine to rob language of its subtle powers and splendour. To teach the doctrine robs students as well. It is one thing to feed them only chops: much worse to tell them that chops are all a lamb comprises.

It is true, the communications teachers say, that the admirable Shakespeare used figures of speech: 'In Shakespeare's time, however, language of this kind was common to everyday speech, and thus natural to the period.' And sure enough, you open Francis Bacon, who lived in Shakespeare's time, and at once we find him saying that a wrong done out of ill-nature is 'like the thorn or briar, which prick and scratch'; and just a couple of lines on, 'cowards are like the arrow that flieth in the dark'. These days, say the communications writers, we don't talk or write like this. We talk plainly, or aspire to do so. Rarely as plainly as Bacon, however. Bacon, 'the first that writ our language correctly', was for the most part a plain writer. Shakespeare was colourful, Bacon

was plain. It seems after all there was no one way to write in the seventeenth century. And in truth there never has been.

On balance, the influence of these communications manuals is likely to be good – at least for communications. The best kind of writing, they suggest, is writing we don't notice (and how pleasant it would be not to notice much of the writing one has to read). To communicate by writing – or by public speaking – is to convey information accurately and precisely. It is the effect of the information that matters, not the effect of the words. After all, this is an information society, not a word society. No doubt when the information in the information society becomes more stimulating, it will be heaven. In the meantime, the utilitarian doctrine propounded in communications manuals does not offer a lot for our enjoyment.

Clarity and precision are highly desirable in language, and much more enjoyable than dullness and prolixity. But language is capable of expressing more than information: it is a vehicle of the imagination

There is a weird
power in a spoken
word . . . And a
word carries far –
very far – deals
destruction through
time as the bullets go
flying through space.

Joseph Conrad,
Lord Jim

Words ought to be
a little wild for they
are the assault of
thoughts on the
unthinking.

J.M. Keynes

Information can tell
us everything. It has
all the answers.
But they are answers
to questions we have
not asked, and
which doubtless
don't even arise.

Jean Baudrillard,
Cool Memories

and the emotions. 'We make all our relationships by talk, all our institutions, all our roles,' as Greg Dening says. We do not make them with information alone. We use words not only to describe what we know, but sometimes also to discover what we don't know. No one would recommend a manual of communications that dealt mainly in figures of speech or 'flowery words'. Equally, no one with a care for the language can recommend improving it by proscribing all adornment and adventure and closing off half its possibilities. No one with a care for people, either, and no one who believes that information need not define all of life in the information age.

One day perhaps someone will be interested enough to trace the point at which this journey into fog began. Was it the Chicago School of economics? When supply-side economics became the main game of politics? Was it the management revolution? Microsoft? (No one *enhances* like the IT business.) Or when Labor parties stopped pretending to be socialist and gave up the fight against the corporation? Whatever it was, the overlap between political and business language became a merger in the early 1980s when economics (and business) became so decidedly the main game. In the years since then business language has been steadily degenerating, mauled by the new religions of technology and management. But its range now spreads well beyond politics and the corporations, and into all the corners of our lives. The same depleted and impenetrable sludge is taught in schools of marketing and business. And, significantly, it is taught in groups; in conscious or unconscious anticipation of the 'teams' that corporate management favours. Few teaching strategies could do

at

Lolita, light of my
life, fire of my loins.
My sin, my soul.

Lo-lee-ta: the tip of
the tongue taking a
trip of three steps
down the palate to
tap, at three, on the
teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.

Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*

He had only one
interpretation of
history and politics,
an economic one; he
saw in altruism the
perspicacious self-
interest of cunning
ambition . . .

He had a
vocabulary just
adapted to his needs,
disliked slang and
commonplaces but
misunderstood a
good many ordinary
words and elided
more sounds in
speaking than
anyone else in Paris.

Christina Stead,
House of all Nations

more to discourage fluency or independent thought. Combine it with the requirement that every 'thought' comes with a reference to some authority, when every authority is written to the same formula and in the same style, and you have guaranteed copious muck, ad nauseam. Put another way, you have doctrine, doctrinally taught.

If in your professional life you want to understand your fellow human beings and be understood by them, practise with a mission statement. And remember, everything worth putting on paper, slide or disk has a dot in front of it. It should look something like this:

What We Stand For: Our Core Beliefs and Values

- *Objectivity is the substance of intelligence, a deep commitment to the customer in its forms and timing.*

Don't worry if you're not entirely sure what this means. Once you have mastered the style you are half way to the philosophy, which is why

the easiest way to write a mission statement is to borrow someone else's. Any sort of outfit will do: a supermarket chain, a public service department or an intelligence organisation. The one quoted here is the CIA's. The dot point preceding the previous one is:

- *Intelligence that adds substantial value to the management of crises, the conduct of war, and the development of policy.*

If you continue to use the CIA model – but McDonald's will do just as well – mention, like they do, *accountability, teamwork, commitment, continuous improvement and adapting to evolving customer needs*. Friends, Romans, customers . . . Of the customer, by the customer, for the customer shall not perish from the earth.

When I told the telecommunications company, Optus, that I was transferring my accounts to its rival, Telstra, a reply came addressed *Dear Valued Customer*. They asked me to *accept our sincerest apologies for any inconvenience or frustration the billing issue, raised may have caused. Optus constantly strives to give our customer's (sic) our best service experience and it is of some concern to us to hear that your expectations were not met by Optus in this instance.*

It is not the misplaced comma and apostrophe that kills these sentences. It's the *billing issue, service experience*; and the glue in the next sentence: *constantly strives, some concern to us, in this instance*. The aim is to sound polite and helpful, but the result is unctuous, unhelpful and depressing. You cannot get through such prose. And subliminally at least, that is the bigger message: you cannot

As long as we live, and whatever fate may have been assigned to us, or we have chosen, there is no doubt that the better the quality of our communication, the more useful (and agreeable) to ourselves and others we will be and the longer we will be remembered. He who does not know how to communicate, or communicates badly, in a code that belongs only to him or a few others, is unhappy, and spreads unhappiness around him. If he communicates badly deliberately, he is wicked or at least a discourteous person, because he imposes labour, anguish, or boredom on his readers.

Primo Levi,
On Obscure Writing

succeed in this. Submit. Roll over. The language of corporations is like a vampire without fangs; it has no venom or bite but you don't want it hanging off your neck just the same.

Modern public language handcuffs words to action, ideas to matter, the pure thought to the dirty deed. It collapses the categories for the sake of convenience. What you think and what you are become one, which is the *team*, where everyone has learned to think the same thoughts, or at least within the same *parameters*. If these parameters are defined by what is called *Knowledge Management (KM)* very likely they encompass a *knowledge entity*. *Knowledge entities are incomplete if they do not cultivate a dialog (sic) between the members of the community of practice to advance the defining and refining of a socially constructed process.* *Knowledge Management* is one more mutant form of the managerialism that walks blithely over a whole tradition of Western philosophy, crushing all subtleties and distinctions.

Verbs are ground out of existence, nouns driven into service

as a substitute for them; all but a few adjectives (*robust, vibrant, enhanced*) are abandoned along with metaphors because they are untidy distractions from the main objective, which is a serviceable instrument of communication. 'First the adjectives wither, then the verbs', Elias Canetti said.

All elegance and gravity has gone from public language, and all its light-footed potential to intrigue, delight and stimulate our hearts and minds. We use language to deal with our moral and political dilemmas, but not this language. This language is not capable of serious deliberation. It could no more carry a complex argument than it could describe the sound of a nightingale. Listen to it in the political and corporate landscape and you hear noises that our recent ancestors might have taken for Gaelic or Swahili, and we ourselves do not always understand. Even some of those who speak and write it will tell you that they don't know quite what it means. Then again, they do not exactly speak or write so much as *implement* it.

The public realm has been in decline since governments retreated from the economy and private companies moved in to take their place. The operation extends well beyond privatised public utilities in gas, water, electricity and transport. Economic revolution has transformed our institutions – colleges and universities, hospitals and medical practices, the public service itself – and transformed our relationships with them in doing so. As the private sector has replaced the public it has found itself obliged to pick up functions and responsibilities that had belonged to governments. They pick them up in different ways, and they use a different term for them: they call it

I am delighted to be able to share with you some important news about our company. On 1 July we will be changing our name to Asteron. The name Asteron is coined from the Greek work 'astron', which means star. Throughout history stars have been recognised as icons that represent navigation, distinction and excellence and as such the star theme is truly representative of Asteron's mission and organisational values.

Letter from insurance company

investing in social capital. Indeed, they use a very different language. The old bureaucratic – *yours of the 4th inst.* – forms were pompous, obscure and prolix. Sir Ernest Gowers' *Plain Words*, Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, and centuries of satire were necessary to decode and knock the stuffing out of them. But at least there was stuffing to be knocked. Generally there was a meaning to be reached, something to be saved. And there was room in this official language for elegant exceptions, a drollery, a little tartness, sudden and unexpected flair. I know people who while working in the old bureaucracies read much of the literary canon, including Joyce and Kafka, in their spare time. No one can prove that this was not public time and money well spent.

Of course the new regimes will never allow the same chance to employees. James and J.S. Mill wrote books that changed the course of history while working for the East India Company, a multinational. Not today they wouldn't. Today they would be attending countless meetings, seminars and

conferences to update their knowledge of work-related subjects, all of them conducted in the mind-maiming language of managerialism. And, to draw a longer bow, the more of these *fora* (*fora*, archaic plural of forum, now common in up-to-date bureaucracies and NGOs where they attend a lot of forums. *In my role as chairperson last year I attended several international fora*) people spend time in, the less likely it is that they will ever know the comfort of seeing their lives reflected in Joseph K or Leopold Bloom or Mr Casaubon. And the benefits of such self-knowledge and of exposure to good writing will, it follows, never find a way into their language.

That is the dire point. Bad as the old language could be, there were always cracks in it and comprehensible, even creative, language could sometimes squeeze through. And even the worst of it was always at least a variant or mutation of the language we all understood. But great lumps of the new language are unrelated to anything ever spoken. It's a kind of self-sealing grout that keeps its speakers – and meaning – unconnected and unexposed to ordinary thought and feeling: *As part of the electronic delivery strategy the vision to enable customers to transact low face value commoditised financial market instruments electronically and seamlessly.* Probably this means that customers will be able to transfer money by electronic means for a reasonable price, but who can say? It might be a secret message that only their customers understand.

The meaning aside, the sentence just quoted contains a common manoeuvre in corporate language: so common, if reason didn't tell us otherwise we might

Puffing Billy is strategically important as it is one of the region's most significant drawcards. The railway has a very high visitor recognition, and is one of the key 'attractors' that drives visitation to the region . . . The Facilities Enhancement Project aims to maintain and further develop the facilities and services of the Puffing Billy railway as a significant world-class tourist attraction in the lead-up to the Commonwealth Games. It focuses on the high priority capital works identified in the ETRB strategic plan.
Victorian Government

conclude it bears some connection to the way organisations actually think and act. The manoeuvre is with the word *strategy*. *The electronic delivery strategy makes it possible to deliver things electronically.* This is very much as we would expect: imagine our surprise if the strategy brought about seamless delivery by rowboat. We might put it down to careless repetition if the same *strategy* did not turn up in so many annual reports, mission statements, even applications for academic research. All modern organisations (and many modern organised people no doubt) must regularly (if not continuously, in the interests of *continuous improvement*) measure their performance. This is done with *KPIs*. *KPIs* are to modern managers what the stars were to early navigation. They set their course by strategic goals and mark them off against results. Who knows, the method may do wonders for the bottom line and human happiness, but you would not think so from what shows on the page. On the page it has a crude pedagogical quality, as if designed for remedial high school students.

Under a general heading of, say, *Leadership*, we see columns and dot points. One column is headed *Strategies* and the other *Results*. Under *Leadership* we get windy summaries of ambitions. The following is typical: *The Museum will be recognised locally, nationally or internationally as an industry (sic) leader through the exemplary way it conducts its activities, serves the community, is accountable to government and responds to sponsors' needs*. Under *Strategies* we read: *Through a collaborative and inclusive process, develop strategic support for regional museums throughout the State*. And in the next column under *Results*: *The Committee facilitated discussions about strategies for effective collaboration and support for regional touring exhibitions*.

There are dozens of strategies and for each of them results must be found. It is no surprise that sometimes the two seem to be all but interchangeable, and there is little to persuade us that in every case the results are written in the light of the *strategy* and not the other way round. The result is something that, for all the talk of *key outputs* (read exhibitions and research) and being *a preferred provider of enjoyable and educational experiences* (visits and tours), looks less like an analysis than blarney, or a charmless parody of Soviet bureaucracy.

What you don't sound like is a museum, a research institution, an institution of character. You say you want to be a *world player* (one state library says *world* three times in its mission statement, though it's not sure what to call the people, formerly known as 'readers', who use the library), but you must also be *community and*

Mother fled,
screaming. She ran
inside and called the
children. Sal assisted
her. They trooped
in like wallabies, all
but Joe. He was away
earning money. He
was getting a shilling
a week from Maloney
for chasing cockatoos
from the corn.

Steele Rudd,
On Our Selection

The word is the
Verb, and the Verb
is God.

Victor Hugo,
Contemplations

customer focused. Whatever your business – brain research, rabbit trapping, underwear manufacturing – you must be equal to the *world's best practice*, and *responsive to customer needs*, *strategic* (of course) and *accountable*, and so on. So you must also be prolix and utterly predictable. You are trapped in the language like a parrot in a cage.

I can think of no better demonstration of the syndrome than when, a few years ago, a Premier of Victoria stood on a stage in front of a troupe of modern dancers who had just completed a performance. The speech began with an appreciation of the dancers' art, but soon veered towards something like he might have delivered in a car plant at the launch of a new model, or to a press conference on Budget night. It was a speech of the kind Australian politicians had been giving for a decade – ever since we learned the trade balance was awry and we must change or follow Argentina to the economic graveyard. Most of the good old lines were there: I seem to remember *international best practice* even found a way into it. I also remember the dance troupe

whose presence on the stage was taken to justify the Premier's theme. Because recently they had been induced to leave Sydney and make their home in Melbourne, much as the Formula One Grand Prix had been snatched from Adelaide, they were proof of dynamic market forces. That a good part of their act satirised these forces was immaterial. They were good; they had been well-reviewed in Europe, hence the talk about competitiveness. So the usual mantras had been rolled out, and the chance of spontaneity reined in. But the dancers' proof of their international competitiveness had left them in a muck sweat, detumescing and blowing like horses after a race, three-quarters naked, pulsing. It was, as they so often say in the arts, and many other places nowadays, *in terms of* an evening in the theatre, quite bizarre.

In terms of is to the language what a codling moth is to an apple tree and just as exasperating. For instance: *Both oil and high tech sectors are characterised by 'leader' and 'laggard' companies in terms of environmental performance.* And all sectors are characterised by dead words. What need, except the need of habit or the need to sound like everyone else in the consultancy sector, is satisfied by *in terms of* in this sentence? For that matter, what good does *characterised* do? Or *environmental performance*? Couldn't they just say: *in both sectors there are companies that lead on the environment and companies that lag behind*?

Here we go again: . . . *the US was an early leader in the area of information disclosure and, in terms of government information, remains far more transparent than many European countries.* We are so used to the expression we may not notice it at first. But look again and you see it has

'You can make a gigantic difference simply by buying products with the Australian Made logo on them.'

Tim Fischer

How forcible are right words!

Job 6:25

We are like the exile in a foreign land whose own language shrinks while he parrots the same constantly familiar phrases of the one that surrounds him.

Jean Amery,

'How Much Home Does a Person Need?'

a grub in it. Remove the grub and you have: *the US was an early leader in the area of information disclosure and government information remains far more transparent than many European countries.* This is not precisely what you want, but once you've made the first move you can see the others, at least as far as saying, *and US governments are still far more transparent than many European countries.* Who knows, you may decide that *transparent* is vague and *area* is a waste of space. So you might re-write the sentence as: . . . *the US was an early leader in information disclosure and US governments continue to disclose much more than many European countries.* You might prefer *disclosing information to information disclosure.* You might decide the bit about being an *early leader* is not worth the trouble. You might want to adjust the nuances, but now at least there are nuances to adjust.

Corporate leaders sometimes have good reason to twist their language into knots and obscure the meaning of it, but more often it is simply habit. They have forgotten