

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Gibberish and Journalism

Jerry Kavanagh · Tuesday, October 22nd, 2013

The essay [Politics and the English Language](#) is as relevant today as it was when George Orwell wrote it in 1946. Within the theme of the essay about the deleterious effects of ugly and slovenly language and thoughts, Orwell offered a prescription that should be administered to professional language manglers until they are cured of what he labeled “doublespeak,” his term for language that deliberately distorts or obfuscates meaning.

In the essay are his rules for writers:

1. Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word
6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

“These rules sound elementary,” Orwell wrote, “and so they are, but they demand a deep change of attitude in anyone who has grown used to writing in the style now fashionable.”

Alas, there are journalists who have grown used to writing and speaking in a style now as fashionable as it is incomprehensible, oblivious as they are to the difference between clarity and the latest jargon, gibberish, or doublespeak that is in vogue.

GIBBERISH

A sideline reporter last season referred to the “enormity” of basketball at Kentucky. Was she really alluding to its extreme wickedness, which is the literal meaning of the word? Batiatus (Peter Ustinov), the unctuous slave trader in the film *Spartacus*, inadvertently got it right when he addressed the politically devious Roman general Crassus (Laurence Olivier) as “your enormity.” A New York Yankees broadcaster uses the redundant “and also...as well” in one sentence, giving new meaning to the phrase “triple double.”

“Modern English, especially written English,” wrote Orwell, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation.” Exactly. Case in point: At one time, “low-hanging fruit” was an original metaphor to describe easy picking. It stopped being original the moment it was first copied. Shortly thereafter, it became a cliché.

Need other examples? Going forward. Moving the needle. Pushing the envelope. Under the radar. At the end of the day. Bottom line. On the same page. Iconic, systemic, organic, granular, viral. If these words and phrases are part of your vocabulary, or if you find examples of your work in [this encyclopedia of clichés](#), put down your pen and step away from the laptop.

If only Orwell were still alive to save us from stories about [How Journalists Can Measure Engagement](#).

UNREADABLE JOURNALISM

“The difference between literature and journalism is that journalism is unreadable and literature is not read,” said Oscar Wilde. That was written over 100 years ago but may as well have been yesterday. On a similar note, Mark Twain wrote, “Those who do not read good books have no advantage over those who cannot read.” The trouble is, bad writers never read good writers. If they did, they’d recognize how inadequate their own prose is. In a speech to Associated Press sports editors last June, Frank Deford addressed his concerns about the decline of good sportswriting and of the class of “optionally illiterate” created by new media who have “chosen not to read or write.” Where are the editors and broadcast executives to save us from the banality? Many are unqualified or ill-equipped for the job; others, no doubt, are like mahouts trying to coax a rogue elephant across the street on a green light. It’s hard to try to convince the recalcitrant writers to act in their own, and the readers’, best interests.

“Media is a word that has come to mean bad journalism,” wrote Graham Greene a generation ago. And that was before there were media watchdogs, surely the most expendable staff position on any newspaper. Do we really need media coverage of the media coverage? It’s the bland leading the bland. Is there anyone more fatuous than a newspaper media columnist, nitpicking a broadcast, who cannot write? More lapdogs than watchdogs, they save their venom for obvious or politically safe targets and curry favor with others more influential.

JARGON

Jargon is what dull writers employ to couch their own insecurities, to try to give the impression that their subject matter is decipherable only to a select few of them who truly understand the arcane vocabulary. Did you know that people no longer watch TV? Instead, we are told that eyeballs (that is, viewers) now consume media. Of course, much of what they consume these days in media causes indigestion.

Oh, and no one proposes a new idea; rather, ideations are the result of thought leaders’ thought processes and mindsets that are rolled out of their thought silos and then ramped up across multiple platforms. If only we could roll these thought leaders into the same silo that Harrison Ford put to good use at the climax of the film *Witness*.

I have spent the last three years teaching in elementary schools. The compensation for and satisfaction in working with the youngsters on their literacy development are great, or as Nobel Prize-winning Irish poet Seamus Heaney noted, “The excitement of something coming out right is its own reward.” One thing about children’s language development: It never includes jargon. That comes much later, when innocence yields to pretentiousness.

Dante designated sycophants for eternal damnation. If he were alive today he’d have to add a separate circle in hell for clods who speak fluent jargon. Something is forever being kicked to the curb while someone is always being thrown under a bus. Milton could return and retitile his masterpiece *Paradigms Lost*.

BASIC ENGLISH

But it’s not simply jargon that jars. It’s basic English. We learned in grammar school that the object of the preposition takes an objective pronoun. I stopped counting the instances of reporters saying “between he and I” or “with she and you.” Many of those same professionals do not know the difference between “its” and “it’s” or between possessives and plurals. They assign apostrophes to simple plural words. Even my local tailor has been corrupted by this. The sign in his shop window reads “Tuxedo’s for Rent.” That tux must be one size that fits all.

More abuses: “Disinterested” does not mean “not interested,” “presently” does not mean “now,” and “fortuitous” does not mean “fortunate.” “Intrical” and “physicality” are not words. “Pushback” and “takeaway” are nonsensical. “Decimated by injuries” does not mean “hit hard.”

Fact checking! Who’s got the time for that? And who needs a dictionary when you have spell check?

“Laziness has become the chief characteristic of journalism, displacing incompetence,” wrote Kingsley Amis. For lazy journalists, “incredible” is the most overworked adjective, used indiscriminately to describe the most mundane people, things, and feats. “‘Incredible’ and ‘incredibly’...like Chernobyl, should be out of service for decades to come,” wrote Tracy Kidder and Richard Todd in their book *Good Prose*.

And don’t bother to read another word of any writer who describes being “blown away” by something. That says all you need to know about his imagination.

“Myriad” is not a noun. “Task” is not a verb; neither is “impact” or “gift” or “medal.” One time, after I had interviewed a reclusive personality, I was asked how I “got the get.” The New York Times wrote about *Those Irritating Verbs-as-Nouns*.

JOURNALISM VS. PUBLIC RELATIONS

“Journalism is printing what someone else does not want printed,” wrote Orwell. “Everything else is public relations.” He never had to deal with sports beat reporters. Remember when they had backbone and did not nod and swallow whole and then regurgitate the platitudes fed to them by managers, coaches, and GMs?

Now, we have beat reporters who cannot think or write and who are too timid or too stupid to ask meaningful questions. I am embarrassed for real reporters when I hear the moronic questions asked by sycophants (with media credentials) at postgame press conferences: “How big was that win?” “How important was this game?” “How [fill in one of these words] surprised/impressed/excited/happy/disappointed/anxious are you?”

Who is writing their script—the clubs’ P.R. directors?

Bryce Harper of the Washington Nationals had it right when he came face-to-face with an inane reporter. “That’s a clown question, bro,” he said in response to some witlessness. Maybe his statement could be written on a placard that drops from every sports team’s clubhouse—a la the secret-word duck from Grouch Marx’s old *You Bet Your Life* TV show—any time a mindless question is put to an athlete.

“The point is that the process is reversible,” wrote Orwell. “[The bad habits] can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. The fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers.”

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