

12 Fiddle-Faddle, Flapdoodle, and Balderdash: Some Thoughts about Jargon

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It goes by various names: medicalese, legalese, businessese, Pentagonese, bureaucratese, and officialese. No segment of public language is immune to its virulent effects. Once contracted, it has a tendency to spread, transmitting its harmful and corrupting influence. Like any disease, it may be considered from the standpoint of its diagnosis, its treatment, prevention, and control. I am, of course, talking not about a rare, communicable physical disease, but about n, that social disease whose effects are no less upsetting to health and public order. For in the minds of many critics, characterized more by dis-ease than disease, the English language is ailing, and in this paper I would like to attempt a diagnosis and offer a remedy.

Undoubtedly there have always been speakers and writers who have resorted to fiddle-faddle, flapdoodle, and balderdash-to meaningless, incoherent, and nonsensical gibberish, characterized by abstract and pretentious language and doublespeak. But in recent years, jargon seems to have spread like an abscess, tainting and infecting the health of the language.

For example, in an article entitled "Telling It Like It Is in the Tower of Babel," the prominent literary critic Cleanth Brooks exclaims:

Ours is a time in which cant is spoken and heard everywhere. It is a time of inflamed rhetoric. Moreover, it is time in which language is systematically manipulated by politicians, advertisers, and publicity [people] as it has probably never before been manipulated. I am concerned with what is happening to our language. But I am, of course, even more deeply concerned with what is happening to ourselves. The two concerns cannot, in fact, be separated. If you debauch a language, you run a grave risk of debauching the minds of the people who use it. (84)

Douglas Bush, writing in *The American Scholar*, reinforces Brooks' claim: "People who have a conscience about language, who see the far

reaching consequences of linguistic corruption, have continued to express concern, because corruption continues to spread not merely in everyday speech and writing but in public utterances on war and peace, indeed in all areas and on all levels" (240). The writer Jean Stafford, in an article in the *Saturday Review World*, is even more assertive:

[U]pon its stooped and aching back it [the American Language] carries an astounding burden of lumber piled on by the sociologists and the psychologists and the psychosociologists, the Pentagon, the ad[agents].... The prognosis for the ailing language is not good. I predict that it will not die in my lifetime, but I fear that it will be assailed by countless cerebral accidents and massive strokes

and gross insults to the brain and finally will no longer be able to sit up in bed and take nourishment by mouth. (14)

An article in *Time* magazine titled "Can't Anyone Here Speak English?" declares that "it takes no schoolmaster's prissiness to recognize that in various major and minor ways, the American language is being brutalized" (35). Melvin Maddocks, in "The Limitations of Language," puts it more forcefully: "With frightening perversity-the evidence mounts daily-words now seem to cut off and isolate, to cause more misunderstanding than they prevent" (20).

Almost no profession or occupation is immune to the bombast, babble, jargon, and jabber of modern prose. Incoherent and meaningless talk and writing seem to have no boundaries. Even the highly respected medical profession has its gibberish. Michael Crichton, author of *The Andromeda Strain* and other popular novels and a doctor, has taken a close look at the writing in medical journals, particularly at back issues of the *New England Journal of Medicine*. His findings? Too many words, too many abstractions, unnecessary complexity, redundancy, repetition, and a poor flow of ideas. An article in *Time* magazine on "Doctor's jargon" quotes Crichton as offering these examples:

Redundancy: The most common form is paired words, for example, "interest and concern," when one would serve nicely.

Wrong words: "Purely" for "only."

Too many abstractions: "Improvement in health care is based to an important extent, on the viability of the biomedical research enterprise, whose success, in turn, depends."

Ambiguity: "Corticosteroids, antimalarial drugs and other agents may impede degranulation, because of their ability to prevent granule membranes from rupturing, to inhibit ingestion or to interfere with the degranulation mechanism per se."

Unnecessary qualifications: "Many, but not all, of the agents also have valuable analgesic effects.... It is usually wise, *unless there is good reason to the contrary*." (35, my emphasis)

In an interview with a reporter for United Press International, Crichton stated that the style of most medical prose is

as dense, impressive and forbidden as possible. Even the simplest concepts are restated in unrevealing forms. The stance of the authors seems designed to astound and mystify the reader with a dazzling display of knowledge and scientific acumen. (B- 11)

Medical prose is not the only kind of writing that exhibits an impairment of language. Legal prose, which in its contaminated form is known as "legalese," also at times displays symptoms of disorder and decay. According to Richard Falk, in an article entitled "Legal Language as Semantic Fog":

Law, as a general system of social control, and the participants in the legal decision-making process, such as legislators, judges, and lawyers, manifest a psychopathic alienation from external reality. This alienation is masked as a mystique allegedly made necessary by the complexity of the data in the field of law. On closer examination, we discover that legal technicalities are devices used to permit high-level abstraction and therefore to cloak the manipulative and self-manipulative forces imbedded deeply in the language of law. (227)

According to an article in *The New York Times*, lawyers and judges "are beginning to worry about how often they have been misunderstood, and they are discovering that sometimes they cannot even understand each other" (B-3). Here are a few examples. In a routine dispute between a tenant and a landlord, the controversy is referred to in legal terms as being between the *petitioner-landlord-appellant* and the *respondent-tenant-respondent*. "All the more" is changed to *hereinbefore*. Legal phrases such as *voir dire*, *res ipsa loquitur* and *Rule in Shelley's Case* abound.

"Law schools blame colleges, colleges blame secondary schools and secondary schools blame primary schools," said Justin A. Stanley, the president of the American Bar Association. "I see a lot of writing that is at best careless. Rules of grammar are disregarded, if in fact they are known. I'd like to have every young lawyer pass a grammar test." (B-3)

Like medicalese and legalese, businessese is a disease that afflicts letters, reports, and articles. Business makes extensive use of the passive voice. In *Is Anybody Listening?* William H. Whyte points out that in business, "Nobody ever does anything. Things *happen-and* the author of the action is only barely implied ... while prices may rise, nobody *raises* them" (48). Carl Goeller, in his book on clear writing, says that

business makes widespread use of stock phrases: *please be advised; in reference to your letter of January 13; we wish to call your attention to the fact that; this letter is in reference to; please feel free to contact me at your earliest convenience* (61). Businessese uses big words, long, involved sentences, and stilted expressions. The antidote? A good dose of brevity, clarity, and simplicity.

Pentagonese flourishes on cliches, euphemisms, and abstract diction. In the Pentagon, a rifle does not merely fire. That's much too simple. Rather it has "the capability of firing." Stefan Kanfer, writing in *Time* magazine, reported that during the Vietnam War a U.S. Air Force colonel grumbled to reporters: "You always write it's bombing, bombing, bombing. It's not bombing. It's air support" (35). This memorable statement would receive the first Doublespeak Award to be given by the NCTE Committee on Public Doublespeak. Israel Shenker reported other euphemisms that came out of the Vietnam war: *advisors* for troops, *wasted* for murdered, and *termination with extreme prejudice* for assassination (21).

Almost as unhealthy as the cliches and euphemisms in Pentagonese is the use of abstract and Latinate diction to obscure clear communication. There are such memorable examples as *infrastructure; defoliation; escalation; routine, limited-duration, protective-reaction air strikes; limited air interdiction, and area denial*.

According to the *Washington Post*, Defense Department documents revealed that a California research company, financed by the Pentagon, is studying ways to "determine the nuclear weapon employment strategy that would eliminate the U.S.S.R. as a functioning national entity" (A-2). Another consulting firm, also financed by the Pentagon, is exploring "the viability of employing strategic nuclear weapons to achieve regionalization of the Soviet Union" (A-2). Asked to explain what this means, a Defense Department official said that this is an attack "that would destroy regional areas that support the present Soviet government" and "unleash forces of separatism" (A-2). This same consulting firm is also looking at ways to "paralyze, disrupt or dismember" the Russian government by wiping out its top officials. This process goes by the name of "strategic targeting against Soviet leadership" (A-2). Said one official who has been involved in all of these Defense Department projects: "We are trying to see in the ultimate nuclear exchange, what should we be trying to do other than just flatten their industry?" (A-2).

One last example of Pentagonese comes from an interview with then Secretary of State Alexander Haig published in *Time* magazine. Haig

was asked: Has El Salvador been overblown as a foreign policy issue? He replied:

I am concerned that with modern communications there is a penchant for episodic emphasis. It always includes the risk that we *will* lose sight of the forest for preoccupation with the trees. (24)

Haig was then asked if he favored conducting human rights diplomacy privately rather than through Congress. He responded:

[W]e must continue to be deeply concerned about abuses to human rights wherever they occur; but, there are such questions as whether amelioration of those abuses is best achieved under the glare of public criticism and animosity and confrontation, or whether it is best achieved in a quieter dialogue between states with a healthy relationship. (24)

Like the other infirmities of language, Pentagonese is an attempt to control the reactions of the public by avoiding language that creates verbal pictures or language that has negative connotations and by substituting a more neutral or abstract language. But such language is not the sole possession of the Defense Department. Continuous exposure to this pestilence of language almost inevitably results in the patient's passing along its symptoms to others. Even presidents are not immune to the virulent effects of jargon. When President Gerald Ford was a guest lecturer at Yale University, he was asked which former president he admired the most. According to Donna Woolfolk Cross, his reply was: "I identify affirmatively with Harry Truman" (46).

The language of former President Ford exhibited symptoms of that malady of language known as bureaucratese. Bureaucratese is the kind of forbidding prose used by government officials and politicians in Washington and in state and city governments. Maury Maverick, a former congressman from Texas, called this kind of writing "gobbledygook." (Chase 1954, 249) Gobbledygook, Maverick maintained, is that polysyllabic language used by the people in Washington. It uses extremely long sentences and pretentious and abstract language. In the *Power of Words*, Stuart Chase gives a number of amusing examples of gobbledygook:

A New Zealand official made the following report after surveying a plot of ground for an athletic field:

It is obvious from the difference in elevation with relation to the short depth of the property that the contour is such as to preclude any reasonable developmental potential for active recreation.

Seems the plot was too steep.

An office manager sent this memo to his chief:

Verbal contact with Mr. Blank regarding the attached notification of promotion has elicited the attached representation intimating that he prefers to decline the assignment.

Seems Mr. Blank didn't want the job. (250)

My favorite example of gobbledygook is taken from a story told by Stuart Chase about the Bureau of Standards in Washington:

A New York plumber wrote the Bureau that he had found hydrochloric acid fine for cleaning drains, and was it harmless? Washington replied: "The efficacy of hydrochloric acid is indisputable, but the chlorine residue is incompatible with metallic permanence."

The plumber wrote back that he was mighty glad the Bureau agreed with him. The Bureau replied with a note of alarm: "We cannot assume responsibility for the production of toxic and noxious residue with hydrochloric acid, and suggest that you use an alternate procedure." The plumber was happy to learn that the Bureau still agreed with him.

Whereupon Washington exploded: "Don't use hydrochloric acid; it eats hell out of the pipes!" (259)

Perhaps it is inaccurate to create a separate category of jargon for officialese, as distinct from bureaucratese or Pentagonese. But what I mean by officialese is the kind of language used by public officials other than government bureaucrats to cover up the clumsy mishandling of public affairs. For instance, Donna Woolfolk Cross reports that the investigating panel that reported on the collapse of the Teton Dome in Idaho, which killed fourteen people, concluded that "an unfortunate choice of design measures together with less than conventional precautions" caused the calamity (31). The *Public Doublespeak Newsletter* noted in its January 1979 issue that an airline reported to its stockholders that the airline had picked up more than \$1.5 million in profits after taxes in 1978 thanks to the "recent involuntary conversion of a 727 aircraft" (3). The "involuntary conversion" was the crash of a plane in Florida in which three passengers died: the airline made more money on insurance than the plane actually was worth. An airline official defended the use of the circumlocution, commenting that the phrase was "a widely used accounting term" (3).

A more humorous, but still ominous, example of officialese is that of Colorado State Representative, A. J. Spano, who is reported in the January 1980 issue of the *Public Doublespeak Newsletter* as having introduced a bill in the Colorado legislature to downplay Denver's reputation as the city with the second dirtiest air in the nation. He proposed a new rating scale so that the level of pollutants called "hazardous" by the

Federal government would carry the more innocuous label *poor*, "dangerous" would become *acceptable*, "very unhealthful" would become *fair*, "unhealthful" would become *good*, and "moderate" would become *very good* (2).

Corporations and other large organizations are extremely sensitive about their relationship with the public. They do not wish to offend any group, nor do they wish to make any public pronouncements that will prejudice their self-interests. Consequently, they develop a language of doublespeak to issue policy announcements, a language that is carefully selected in content and form. Such language is used either to withhold information or to present it in a disguised manner. Seldom does it present a clear statement of facts to the public.

The danger in using officialese is that it oversimplifies or blurs complex situations. By calming anxiety and anger, it may lull people into a false sense of security, make bureaucratic bungling seem harmless, and seriously interfere with people's perceptions of reality. When abstract language and euphemisms are substituted for more accurate terms, people may mistakenly believe that public officials have identified a cause and that a remedy will follow. But their words are often nothing more than meaningless abstractions used to evade responsibility for their actions.

The examples of jargon from various professions, occupations, and disciplines could go on forever. The essential question is, Why do speakers and writers use jargon? Some writers use jargon to obscure the truth. Others use it to sound impressive, to give the user status. Still others use it to conceal a lack of ideas or to give weak ideas authority. In *Death in the Afternoon*, Ernest Hemingway decried this lack of clarity in language:

If a man writes clearly enough anyone can see if he fakes. If he mystifies to avoid a straight statement, which is very different from breaking so-called rules of syntax or grammar to make an effect which can be obtained in no other way, the writer takes a longer time to be known as a fake.... True mysticism should not be confused with incompetence in writing which seeks to mystify when there is no mystery but is really only the necessity to take to cover lack of knowledge or the inability to state clearly. (54)

At the beginning of my essay, I said that I wanted to do two things: to attempt a diagnosis of the use of jargon and to offer a remedy. Although in the course of this essay, I have given a diagnosis of sorts, by presenting examples of jargon from medicine, law, business, and government, I would now like to isolate more specifically the main features of jargon, make a few qualifying comments about each, and

then conclude with a remedy that may contain effective advice for the novice writer.

Jargon is characterized by the following:

1. Using several words when one word will do:

exhibits a tendency	→	tends
in an efficient manner	→	efficiently
make inquiry regarding	→	inquire
resembling in nature	→	like
reach a decision	→	decide
avail oneself of	→	use
render operative	→	fix
causative factor	→	cause
a long period of time	→	long time

2. A preference for abstract nouns ending in *-tion*, *-ity*, *-ment*, *-ness*, *-ance*, *-ative*, *-ate*, *-ous*, *-cy*, *-ist*, and the like:

utilization	dentition
nullity	pertinacity
apportionment	exigency
credulousness	diplomatist
discountenance	parsimonious

3. Excessive use of words with Latin or Greek prefixes:

abnegation	debriefing
circumspect	upgrade
contravene	antitechnology
nonpreferential	bioelectric
intrazonal	dishabituate

4. The use of stock phrases:

in the final analysis
 other things being equal
 from the point of view of
 within the framework of
 in the event that

5. The substitution of euphemisms for less explicit inoffensive terms:

terminal living	→	dying
defensive maneuver	→	retreat
mild irregularity	→	constipation
bathroom tissue	→	toilet paper

encore telecast	→	rerun
senior citizens	→	old people
underprivileged	→	delinquent
substandard housing	→	slum

6. The overabundant use of cliches:

lock, stock, and barrel	one and all
null and void	as thick as thieves
pick and choose	a grievous error
safe and sound	all to the good
fair and square	blank amazement

7. The extensive use of the passive voice, rather than the use of the more direct active voice:

Passive:	Job opportunities may be increased by higher education.
	Competitive activities should be avoided.
	The report has been solicited by the committee.
	Unpredictable elements must be anticipated.
Active:	Higher education may increase job opportunities.
	Avoid competitive activities.
	The committee has solicited the report.
	Anticipate the unpredictable.

8. The extensive use of noun strings:

human factors engineering support
host area crisis shelter production planning workbook
management information system plan Congress refugee panel visit ban

Almost all of these characteristics of jargon, of course, need qualifying. Occasionally a long phrase such as "along the lines of" might be more appropriate than "like." Abstract nouns are not always to be avoided, especially if they can take the place of a long phrase. Latin and Greek prefixes often add flexibility to the language, enabling us to coin new words. Stock phrases such as "inasmuch as" and "with reference to" sometimes enable our thoughts to flow more smoothly than single words. And surely euphemisms are not always to be avoided. One can think of certain social situations, dealing with death or bodily functions, for example, when a euphemism might be used to avoid unpleasant associations. And like euphemisms, cliches also have a place in the language. Is it always more effective in speech or writing to say "cold" rather than "as cold as ice"? Some cliches add intensity to the language.

There are times when the passive voice cannot be avoided, especially when we don't always know the agent in our sentences. There are also times when the passive voice may be preferred, as in the description of a scientific process, when the writer wants to put the emphasis on the process and not on the agent. Finally, noun strings can sometimes add flexibility to the language. Short noun strings abound in the written and spoken language-e.g., pressure cooker, life style, case study.

So much for the diagnosis. Now for some remedies:

1. Punctuate long sentences so that they give the effect of a series of shorter sentences and so that they are more easily read.
2. Prefer the single word to the circumlocution.
3. Replace abstract and general words with concrete and specific words.
4. Avoid using too many words with Latin or Greek prefixes and suffixes.
5. Avoid euphemisms.
6. Avoid clichés and stock phrases.
7. Prefer the active voice to the passive.
8. Rewrite noun strings as prepositional phrases or relative clauses.

Clearly, all of these guidelines must be modified in relation to the writer's purpose, his or her audience, and the occasion. The kind of style I am advocating is the so-called plain style, a style that emphasizes economy of language, useful for much public discourse, but there are other styles that might be more appropriate for particular situations.

I began this paper by using medical metaphors of sickness and remedy, disease and cure, talking about language as if it were an organism like the human body, which over the years has become corrupted and defiled. But these analogies, like all analogies, must be accepted with reservations, for as Ronald Gross says in his article "On Language Pollution":

The job of the critic of language today calls for diligence as well as intelligence. Wholesale denunciations of the state of the tongue are of limited usefulness. It is more courageous to call one prominent [person] a liar than to proclaim that the entire language is become debased. Not language, but this [person's] words: not the whole tongue, but this party's evasions and obfuscations must become targets. This is unremitting, unpretentious work, to be undertaken by many hands whose impact will only be collective. (58-59)

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