

HEALTH CARE, GEORGE ORWELL AND A LESSON IN ENGLISH (Originally published June 1971)

Whenever you have difficulty reading and understanding a particular sentence or paragraph because of its wording or phraseology, you can be certain that a) the subject defies explanation, b) the writer is inept and not sure of what he wants to say, or c) a deliberate attempt is being made to obscure meaning with semantics.

We have here a plan to develop innovative modifications and interrelationships of service components with conjoint funding. This will facilitate achievement of equity of access to a full spectrum systems development. It should encourage coordination of outreach, promote incentives for cost containment and provide in system monitoring effectiveness. Once the implementation for phasing of specifics is met by in depth and appropriately timed restudies of cost adjustments, we can come to grips in an ongoing manner to restructure the consumer interface.

Now, if you are not careful, you might believe that the preceding paragraph is supposed to make sense. Actually, the sentences were composed of words and phrases lifted at random from fifteen pages of typewritten material sent out in April to Muscogee County Society members explaining HEW's proposal for setting up a local Health Care Corporation.

For a long time, psychiatrists held almost a medical monopoly for writing cryptic jargonese, but since government sociologists and "health professionals" entered our field, unintelligibility has soared to new levels. The tendency to mask intentions and camouflage meaning under a barrage of words has always been a distinguishing feature of political and bureaucratic prose. This type of writing was especially maddening to the late George Orwell who filled several essays on the English language with devastating criticisms of the practice.

"Modern English," he wrote, "especially written English is full of bad habits which spread by imitation . . . The mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristics of modern English prose, and especially any kind of political writing."

In the 1940s, Orwell identified and classified many of the hackneyed abominations commonly in use:

- *Dying Metaphors* - or worn out phrases, which people use to save themselves trouble of inventing new ones (examples: *stand shoulder to shoulder with, leave no stone unturned, ride roughshod over*).

- *Verbal False Limbs* - in which simple verbs are replaced with phrases to pad sentences with extra syllables (examples: *play a leading part in, exhibit a tendency to, serve the purpose of*).
- *Pretentious Dictation* - words used to dress up or give "culture" to simple statements (examples: epoch making, inexorable, veritable, ameliorate, fantastically, and foreign expressions like *deus ex machina, Weltanschauung*).
- Marxist Jargon - often words and phrases poorly translated from German, French or Russian (examples: *petty bourgeois, mad dog, lackey, flunkey, revanchist*).
- *Not Un-formations* - where a double negative arrangement is used in place of a simple positive (examples: *not unlikely, not unjustifiable, not inconsistent with*).
- *Meaningless Word* - particularly those used in art and literary criticism (examples: *vitally human, perceptive catholicity, living quality, ambiance, meaningful*).

In his novel, *1984*, Orwell accurately foresaw the degeneration of language into the gobbledygook of "newspeak," but he died long before the avalanche of social engineers really began to bury us in tortured prose. He would have had a field day with such modern horrors as *relate, identify with, ongoing, to fund, systematize, relevant, to implement, reorientation, commensurate with, restructure, in depth, parameters, modalities, multiphase screening, outreach, phase out, functional management needs, health service consumers, exceptional children, ecological dialogue, etc., etc.*

In Orwell's opinion, one of the great faults of political and bureaucratic writing was its use of ready-made phrases:

It consists in gumming together long strips of words, which have already been set in order by someone else, and making the results presentable by sheer humbug. It is easier, even quicker, once you have the habit, to say, "In my opinion, it is not an unjustifiable assumption that . . ." than to say, "I think."

Most bureaucratic, and especially political speech writing, is aimed at defending the indefensible by the use of euphemism, question begging and plain vagueness.

Consider for instance some comfortable English professor defending Russian totalitarianism. He cannot say outright, "I believe in killing off your opponents when you can get good results by doing so." Probably therefore, he will say something like this:

"While freely conceding that the Soviet regime exhibits certain features that the humanitarian may be inclined to deplore, we must, I think, agree that a certain curtailment of the right to political opposition is an unavoidable concomitant of transitional periods, and that the rigors that the Russian people have been called upon to undergo have been amply justified in the sphere of concrete achievement."

The inflated style itself is a kind of euphemism. A mass of Latin words falls upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outlines and covering up all details. The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. [Our italics.] I can't tell what was originally italicized. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish squirting out ink.

Political language, and this is true of all political parties from Conservatives to Anarchists, is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.

Orwell was an intellectually honest, dedicated Socialist who could not abide sham and deceit. He was an economical writer who wrote what he thought instinctively in clear, uncluttered prose. When instinct failed, he relied on a simple set of writing rules:

- 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 out a word, 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 if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- 6) Break any of these rules sooner than saying anything outright barbarous.

Since Orwell's death more than twenty years ago, the kind of garbage writing he so detested has increased a thousand-fold. The fifteen-page OEO-HEW proposal for a regional Health Care Corporation sent out in April was a prime example. In fact, just reading it was enough to make one experience those unsettling involuntary, rhythmic, reflex modalities of reverse upper alimentary peristaltic activity productive of offensively regurgitate gastro-duodenal effluvia. In short, to make one vomit.