

'Death Sentence: The Decay
of Public Language,' Don Watson
(Random House, 2003)

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,

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 were 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 Pasyonkov*

'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*.