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Your Oral Language Could Be Better

More Effective Style As A Means To More Functional Communication

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When the layman uses the word *style* in respect to public speaking, he is usually referring to the total presentation. Style to the rhetorician, however, has a more limited meaning: language. He has in mind the selection of symbols and their combination, both of which are designed to promote acceptance of the speaker's ideas and to assist him in achieving a predetermined response from his audience. Thus, it can be seen that style is not an end in itself, something to be admired for what it is, but rather a means to an end. By serving some more important purpose, Thonssen and Baird affirm, language becomes functional.

Word Choice

Diction means selection of words. Good diction, like good pronunciation, is not the usage of the public in general but rather that usage which is characteristic of the educated people of the community. Such persons don't employ language in a manner which attracts at-

tention to themselves. You must not gain the impression that the best words are necessarily the most erudite or the most sophisticated symbols which might be chosen to express an idea. The prime term in a given case might be the simplest and clearest, or the most striking, or the one which creates vivid imagery. Effective diction is appropriate, per-
spicuous, and interesting. Utilize words not with the purpose of showing off but rather to communicate directly in a stimulating manner.

Projection

When you talk about anything, even when you relate what you observe, some of yourself is projected into the report. Words are seldom a completely valid and universally accepted statement of the characteristics of anything. To a considerable extent, what is inside you is exposed as a result of describing an object. You comment, "The flower is red." Physically speaking, the flower is absorbing all the colors of white light from

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the sun except red, which is being rejected and reflected to your eye. The redness is not in the flower; it is in you. You say, "Beverly is beautiful." The beauty is partly in your head, because she happens to fit your notion of beauty: tall, slender, active, blond, etc. Another person, who admires short, plumpish, quiet, brunettes might not regard Beverly as beautiful.

It isn't surprising that your description of anything is highly subjective when you consider that what you sense is not solely dependent upon the source of the stimulus. You add an important variable to the final impression attained. The known, therefore, is necessarily what you are plus what is known, that is, a combination of you and the known.

The semanticist uses a graphic illustration to dramatize this point. Immerse your left hand in a bucket of water which is 34 degrees Fahrenheit and your right hand in a bucket of water which is 125 degrees. After thirty seconds, remove your hands from the buckets. Simultaneously and immediately place both in a third bucket of water which is 65 degrees. Is the water in the third bucket warm or cool? It is both — at the same time. Your left hand tells you that it is warm, of course, and your right hand, that it is cool. Thus, definitions are not to be found anywhere but in the people who use and react to them. Think of words as being highly subjective, emotional, arbitrary, and somewhat unreliable designations — some more so than others.

The Referent

Many of us forget that the word is only a symbol and not the thing for which it stands. Flags and anthems are not nations; names are not people; you can't eat the word "bread" nor wear the word "hat." Yet, we tend to react to symbols as if they were actually that which they merely represent. Who is most likely to do so? People of backward cultures, partly civilized groups, the least intelligent and the most superstitious of our own society, and all of us on occasion do under emotional stress. Somebody calls you a coward, and you want to hit him. Because he applies the term "coward" to you, does not make you one. It is only a word.

Technically a concept has a new meaning each time it appears in a sentence, because it derives its signification from the experiences of the person who utters it. No two lives are the same. No single life remains the same from day to day, from hour to hour, or even from moment to moment. Therefore, a person could not speak the same word more than once with exactly the same meaning. Heraclitus said that one cannot step into the same river twice. Both the river and the man are in a constant state of change.

Life is an ongoing process, which your language should reflect. The semanticist turns to the technique of labeling and dating (cow₄, February 12, 1962)¹ to emphasize not only that each object is unique in itself but that it is ever fluctuating. To be mentally

1. Cow₄, February 12, 1962, is the semanticists method of emphasizing that every cow in the world is unique and that his reference is to a particular cow at a given time in that cow's life.

healthy, you must continue to revise your opinions, beliefs, attitudes, and habits in respect to the changing world around you. Senility and also mental illness tend to be manifested by the failure to adjust to the evolving environment.

There are some aged people who are not senile, as evidenced by their language, because they have continued to adapt to the ongoing process of life.

The Concrete-Abstract Scale

Concreteness and abstractness can be placed at opposite ends of a continuum concrete abstract as a means of indicating that the two terms are not separate entities but rather opposite polar degrees of the same concept.

Every word has a certain amount of both characteristics in it. The more concrete the symbol, the less it is abstract and vice versa. Concrete language is specific, exact, clear, distinct, limited. It deals with that which is readily apparent to the senses. Abstract language, on the other hand, is theoretical, general abstruse, doctrinaire. The word "furniture" is not nearly as abstract as "personal possession." Yet "Danish Modern sofa" is more concrete than "furniture." Notice that when you abstract you utilize only a part of the whole. Let us suppose that you have a definite artifact in mind. You might correctly refer to it as "property," or "means of transportation," or "vehicle," or "auto," or "Ford," or "Ford sedan," or "1962 Ford sedan," etc. Each expression was more concrete than the former. The referent became increasingly perspicuous to your listener as you moved from "property" to "1962

Ford sedan," because you progressively offered a more limited choice of signification. The greater the selection of possible referents given the listener the less likely he is to share your thoughts. With "1962 Ford sedan" in mind, say "property"; and then poll the audience. Not one auditor will have guessed the referent. "Beauty," "patriotism," and "justice" are abstractions which offer the hearer an immense area from which to choose meaning.

You will profitably do some abstracting; for if you did not, your specifics would be unorganized. What do they add up to? Why did you mention them? The interpretation of evidence, the reasoning process, is one of abstracting. This drawing off or summing up is a vital phase of any discourse. Only man can abstract, which is the highest form of rational behavior. Valuable as abstracting is to communication, however, speakers could usually profit by using more concrete language, that is, if they wish to be explicit and vivid. Don't say, "a man" when you could say, "John Pillsbury of Detroit." Don't say, "an authority" when you could say, "Professor Loren Reid of the University of Missouri." Don't say, "A fellow was injured" when you could say, "Bill Downs, sophomore at the University of Iowa, broke his leg in two places below the knee." The journalist's secret for concreteness lies in the answers to the questions: Who, what, when, where, why, how? The information, you can be sure, will be concrete.

Loaded Language

Some words contain a great deal of emotion and subjective implication,

which tend to exaggerate a situation. They are rich in connotation, that is, in personal meaning and feeling. Such symbols are said to be slanted or loaded. One type of positively connotated language the propaganda analyst calls "glittering generalities," e.g., "Americanism," "the American way of life." "Name calling" is a form of negative connotation, e.g., "gold brick," "apple polisher." "Butter" is a term that stirs pleasing thoughts, at least when compared to "oleomargarine." The margarine manufacturers must sometimes refer to butter in their advertising, but they avoid the word itself. Generally, as a substitute a dissatisfying expression is coined, such as "the high-priced spread" or "the expen-

sive spread." Restaurateurs make the most of enticingly loaded phraseology in order to enhance the appeal of their food. They could (and many do) offer simply milk, lettuce, vegetables, butter, tomatoes, coffee, potatoes, waffles, cream, etc. But observe what some clever cuisines print on their menus: "fresh milk," "salad on a bed of crisp lettuce," "garden vegetables," "creamery butter," "ripe tomato," "a steaming cup of mellow coffee," "creamy mashed potatoes," "golden-brown crisp waffles," "pure, heavy, country-fresh, sweet cream," "french-fried potatoes sculptured from fresh plump, Idaho spuds," "iced coffee topped with a cascading mountain of whipped, country-fresh cream."²

2. William H. Whyte, "Is Anybody Listening?" New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952, p. 36.

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Your choice of favorably or unfavorably loaded language is influenced by whether you approved or disapprove of

positive slanting

inhabitant of Mozambique
 Nixon - statesman
 The Marshall Plan
 strategic withdrawal (of military forces)
 office-holder
 an interested and tireless worker
 an automobile with experience
 regrouping of forces
 a loyal non-union employee who reports for work during a strike
 after-shave lotion or "Skin-Bracer"

Under certain circumstances, even negatively loaded evaluation can be desirable. A newcomer or a burgeoning organization seeking public recognition would prefer commendation; but lacking this, derogation is sometimes considered better than no acknowledgment at all. Don't complain about what they call you as long as they spell your name right, quipped Babe Ruth. While Franklin Roosevelt's political opponents depreciated him, the President was secretly satisfied at least that assiduously his name was being brought before the public. He wisely avoided returning the advantage by drawing upon such phrases as "the opposition," "some critics of the administration," "my oponent." When Hitler was building the Nazi Party, he longed for publicity of any kind. Later he wrote: "In those days I took the viewpoint: no matter whether they present us as fools or as criminals; the main thing is that they mention us, that they occupy themselves with us again and again . . ."³

something. Note how paradoxically the same person, object, or situation can be described:

negative slanting

savage
 Nixon - politician
 Truman's Giveaway Program
 rout
 bureaucrat
 an eager beaver
 a used car
 retreat
 a scab
 men's perfume

An understanding of loaded language will help you to wield it more skillfully in addresses of persuasion, inspiration, and entertainment, where it is most appropriate, and to avoid it in an expository discourse, where unbiased reporting is called for. In addition, as a critic of speeches, you will listen carefully for slanted terms; for they will tell you a great deal about the speaker if not about his subject.

Choice of words and composition are self-disclosing indicators of education and breadth of point of view. By exposing or failing to reveal meaning, you make known the extent of your awareness of semantic deceptions. The delicate balance between abstract and concrete terminology and the path around a myriad hidden traps of ambiguity are yours to discover to great advantage or to ignore with dismal consequences. It is said that style is the man. Your time and energy could not be more profitably spent on another discipline.

3. Adolf Hitler, "Mein Kampf," New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1939, p. 732.