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Review Article  
The Decline of Language\*

It need not have taken Richard Nixon's mendaciously edited *White House Transcripts* to remind us that something is very much awry in the American version of the king's English. Lies, perjury, empty slogans and machine-readable jargon have been the currency of public discourse for many years. This abuse of language has become so flagrant that writers and educators alike have begun to reflect upon the tools of their trade. The very existence of public discourse is brought into question as a result of the tradition that encompasses the U-2 incident, the Bay of Pigs, the events recounted by the Pentagon Papers, and the very framework and articulation of Nixon's political career. Whether we see this as a purely American phenomenon may depend upon our ability to accept the latter's assertion that "they all do it".

Like George Orwell in "Politics and the English Language" (1946), American journalists were feeling the pricks of conscience, as the reader of their political commentaries will have noted in the past year or so. Now books are appearing to raise the alarm about what is happening to language and literacy, and how their abuses can be powerful devices of political control. David Wise's *The Politics of Lying* (New York: Random House, 1973), which reveals the scandalous private lives of policies with sanctimonious public images, is an example of this literature, and is representative of the emerging awareness of the political implications of language abuse. Yet there has appeared no systematic account of this malady of language, even though the sickness is perceived and regretted from left, centre and right. In consequence,

\* *Strictly Speaking: Will America be the Death of English?* By Edwin Newman. Bobbs-Merrill, 1974. Pp. 205. \$7.95.

the diagnoses that have appeared can do no more than blame the condition on the evil, the illiterate, the brokers of power, or the ever-conveniently maligned technocrats. A book that manages to do all of these is Edwin Newman's *Strictly Speaking: Will America be the Death of English?*

For the same reason that it is easy to criticise language and those who use it, it is also very difficult to place that criticism in a systematic or theoretical framework. Language is difficult to pin down and analyse in convenient categories. Depending upon one's interest or point of view, language is: a class of objects, or a form of behavior; sight or sound; a structure of positively defined elements and operating principles, or an infinitely indefinite and temporal psychosomatic phenomenon; the form in which high cultures realise themselves, or the mere reflection and objectification of basic survival instincts; a universal characteristic of human nature, or a culturally specific response to the material conditions of life. So it is not surprising that peculiar speech and speakers are easily criticised, with little likelihood that the critic will be held responsible according to normal demands for formal coherence, ideological consistency, historical foundation, or even the usual patterns of moral indignation. Emblematic of this critical licence are the typical synonyms for language and speech, which are commonly understood to be pejorative: rhetoric, jargon, lecture (-ing), sermon (-ising), preach (-ment), speech (-ify), propaganda, argot, lingo, *patois*. It is easy to form the impression that language, especially spoken language, is a popular subject of ridicule.

The criticisms of contemporary language can be placed in two general categories. The mis-use of language, some hold, is due to the undesirable character of the speaker who, because of evil intent, ambition, or fear of the truth, perpetrates all kinds of linguistic sins that have the effect of preventing communication or accomplishing it in a way that serves his own ends at the expense of both the public and the truth. We are referring, of course, to the politician as the archetype of the seeker of power.

Alternatively to the view that language is abused by evil intent, there is the more generous view that the great and characteristic faults in

modern language are actually the product of the good, if naive, intentions of those most sincerely bent upon the discovery, order, and application of new knowledge. Thus the scientist, mathematician and logician; the professionally trained administrator; the academic social scientist, philosopher and psychologist are comprised in the guilty party. Out of the sheer avidity for factual knowledge and the study of ways that it might be useful to mankind, they have managed to disseminate into language both a vocabulary and a contagious spirit of brittle, abstract and obsessive positivism which actually prevent all of us from speaking with clarity and precision. A possible third category of criticism, directed toward educators, "new" curricula and modern teaching methods, is really only a particular case of the general view concerning the impact of science and technology upon contemporary language.

Blaming the maladies of modern English on the politicians and the academics does not lead to proposals for reform, nor even to continued examination. There is nothing new in the proposal to replace the power-hungry with good men, who are as hard to find as ever. The argument to throw out the academic bums is even more unattractive for a number of reasons, the most obvious of which is that, perhaps, the fatal damage has already been done. Arguments of blame are not guidelines to change, nor even to understanding of the problem.

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*Strictly Speaking* claims to address itself to the sickness and idiocy of public language, not only in America but wherever vulgarisation appears on stage, in newsprint, or in the ineffectual garble of ordinary discourse. British sports writing seems to be the only exception to the general state decline. Although the book pretends to treat this subject, it is hard not to reach the conclusion that the book is more a symptom than a diagnosis of the disease. It is, in fact, not a serious book, and rarely tries to be, although Newman claims to be genuinely disturbed by the extent to which literacy and speech have become subverted. His is a broad attack, with complaints lodged at many doors: government, advertising, television and the daily press, corporation annual reports,

academics and their administrators, ethnic jokes, political speech writers, opinion polls, restaurant menus, political conventions, and modern social science, *inter alia*.

It is worth repeating that this is not a serious work. It was undoubtedly meant to be a contribution to humour, and it occasionally is that. Newman has had an eye and an ear out for malapropisms, poor grammar and mindless jargon for some time, and it is the major (if modest) value of this book that it catalogues some new and funny ones among the garden variety. But the humorous style is so unrelenting and puerile it is clear that the book was meant for bed-time reading and book club giveaways.

Aside from the cloying funniness of the book, it is just badly written; hence my observation that it is precisely a symptom of the low level of literacy lamented by its author. Part of Newman's humour — a corollary to his unrepentant delight in puns — is to carry a colloquial phrase or bit of jargon into his monologue to absurd lengths. While his persistence with this device is annoying, it is even more annoying to have to report numerous occasions when it is not at all clear that he was conscious of his own awkward expressions. What is worse is that each chapter is virtually devoid of any organisation or thematic development beyond a cute title to serve as a point of departure. Often one has the feeling that the paragraphs were assembled at random, or have come together only through the printer's omitting several pages of intervening text. In short, the book is badly, carelessly written and published, and is thus little more than a piece of evidence that remonstrations against illiteracy can be served up and sold in the very form of the problem. Is this to ask, Why cast pearls before swine?

At least Newman can be credited with raising the problem of language debasement as a phenomenon worthy of notice and condemnation. On his very first page, he raises the question in his subtitle, and offers his opinion that America *will* be the death of the English language. Exactly what he means by that, or what he would like to do about it (except chuckle), is successfully ignored throughout the book. One would have hoped for more from a veteran television reporter of international news whose conscience concerning the language he

professes to love has been sufficiently bothered to produce this book.

Apart from affirming and illustrating the decline of language in American English (the worst offender), *Strictly Speaking* makes no real arguments about this subject as a social process or as a phenomenon susceptible of theoretical analysis. Individuals, groups and professions which can be found to barbarise language are attacked, but this is done as if they are somehow guilty and perverse in themselves. Language is a helpless maiden: innocent, exposed to seduction from all sides, an eternally youthful beauty with no means of protection, no hope of recovery from sullied virginity and no plans for the future.

Newman does suggest a couple of factors which have contributed to the misappropriation of language. He says, "I believe that the decline of language stems in part from large causes. One of those causes is the great and rapid change this country went through in the 1960s." (p.9) Part of this change "was that people who felt oppressed by society organized their demands either for the first time or with greater success than ever before — blacks, Indians, Chicanos, women", *et cetera*. The interesting questions as to how and why language was particularly available for these demands are not raised. Now apparently what Newman means here is that these newly demonstrative groups developed a kind of confrontational rhetoric that became gradually more violent, stylised, and formulaic. But he does not say this, preferring to wander off into a discussion about the good side to the generation gap and the displeasing aspect of recent Broadway plays. It is strange that he should attribute part of "the decline of language" to oppressed social groups without observing that perhaps language was one of the few weapons available to them, a weapon that was often rather effective. It is also curious that the author does not mention that the protest rhetoric of the 1960's produced possibly the only memorable speeches and speakers of an entire generation. Martin Luther King's addressing himself to large causes did not produce a decline in language. In fact, his speeches probably represent the only genuine acts of oral communication to be discovered in American public discourse since the second World War.

The problem is how one distinguishes large causes. Newman may have it just backwards in pinpointing the movements concerning the

environment, racial discrimination, and other forms of systematic social impoverishment as the perpetrators of a decline in language. (Newman does not mention the anti-war movement here, for some reason.) It might, in fact, be argued that the rhetoric of social justice is one of the few lifelines in the identity of a language, and that the words, ideas and lucid expressions representing the best a language has to offer are to be found in the recurrent moments of revolutionary protestation. Finally, a case might be made that the considerable verbiage produced by the "me too" protest organisations and minor activists of recent years is less the influence of "large causes" than it is the unwitting reliance upon the repetitive, absurd slogans of commercial advertising and the vacuous cant of political party platforms.

War is another large cause. Essayists, pundits and even comedians have focussed upon Vietnam as the fountain of innumerable poisons for the English language because the phrases were so much and so long with us, and most of them, even upon endless repetition, remained silly and morally offensive. Newman did not fail to recognise this, and rightly rebukes "media folks" for accepting them for their own use: "protective reaction strike, surgical bombing, free-fire zone, interdiction, contingency capability, New Life Hamlet – which in sterner days was a refugee camp.... Money paid to the family of a South Vietnamese civilian killed by mistake was called a condolence award." (p.63) But the media are in for no more than a rebuke, because they were merely reporting the facts while the " 'nation's dialogue' was shaped by what was done in Vietnam, principally by [Lyndon Johnson]". (p.62)

Thus we are back on familiar ground. Responsibility for the brutalisation of language is charged to the deceptive and benighted politicians. And aside from the outright lying which paralysed public discourse throughout America's combat involvement in Vietnam – a fact which Newman does not comment upon – the great manufactories of euphemism, the "White" House and the "Defense" Department, can be easily chastised for having within their ranks the author's cast of demons, although Newman does not go so far as to make this argument, of course. The presumption is open that Vietnam might have been a

nice war for the English language were it not for those public relations men, the graduate-degreed systems analysts and Secretary MacNamara's cost efficiency accountants who could not prevent themselves from creating such terms as acceptable marginal kill ratio, air activity levels and body counts.

The conclusion is available that if it had not been for these bad and misguided technocrats, and several other groups whose rhetoric was very careless, the 1960's might have been a good decade for the English language. It would not have been necessary to have riotous passions inflamed in the cities; it would not have been appropriate for the press corps to call the daily U.S. military command briefings in Vietnam "the five o'clock follies". In the words of Nixon's speech writers, we could "lower our voices" so that we could begin to hear each other. At least here Nixon told the truth, as he urged the nation in his first inaugural address: "speak quietly enough so that our words can be heard as well as our voices....government will listen. We will strive to listen in new ways." In retrospect, we might be able to interpret Nixon's admonition as an expression of his concern over input overload and background noise on his network of tape recorders.

*Strictly Speaking* is obviously no more than a humorous diversion: a television reporter taking a busman's holiday. Newman reports an evolution in language as it is taking place, gives more than ample illustrations of this trend, editorialises to the extent that he seriously deplors it, and yet when he goes beyond illustration to suggest causal factors, his impressions are superficial and sadly incoherent. Any further concern for his book would be a waste of effort if it were not to provide an opportunity to raise several questions about the life of contemporary language.

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To raise these questions directly, then, *why* and *how* has this deterioration of literacy occurred? Does a language gradually and steadily weaken as a medium of sane communication simply because of the fortuitous appearance of bad men and wrenching social move-

ments? Alternatively, are there to be found relatively continuous social and technological forces of which language debasement (or change) is merely the reflection? Can the fault, if so regarded, be located within one or several pervasive institutions, such as journalism, commercial broadcasting or the system of education? Is it accidental that the decline of language is a phenomenon that is so intensely American in character? Is language an inexorable articulation of the aims, methods and values of a society?

Merely to raise these questions is to express the idea that language is not an independent organism with a life and behavior of its own. To raise questions of language is to raise questions about the society in which it is an active force and for which it plays a profound part as both a picture of its conscious designs and a mirror of its self-image. And such an inquiry cannot fail to involve social theory. In this sense, linguistic theory and social theory are intertwined. Critics of contemporary language who ignore this do so at the expense of failing to consider language as a part of the life of which it is the most available expression.