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A Civil Tongue

Cover Page Footnote

*This address was delivered in the spring of 1983 at Sacred Heart University as the Dr. William H. Conley Charter Day Lecture.

EDWIN NEWMAN

*A Civil Tongue**

I am here to speak about language, a suitable subject for any audience at any time, and a convenient belief for somebody who has written the books I have. But I think it is more than suitable; I think it is urgent. We have no hope of dealing with our problems except by chance unless we understand them, and we cannot understand them or one another unless we dig ourselves out from the jargon, the mush, the smog, the dull, pompous, boneless, gassy language under which we Americans have been burying ourselves. That may not seem to be as dramatic a challenge as some others that face the country. It may be thought not to be something by which a nation lives or dies, but in the long run, it is as pressing as any, and in the short run as well.

Perhaps at the outset I should deal with some of the charges that are made against me. I do not advocate freezing the language; I am not trying to stand in the way of change; I don't want everybody to speak as I do. I can hear dozens of NBC news producers saying, "God forbid!" I think that slang adds richness and originality to the language, and I believe that the many sources that contribute to American English, including some now being drawn upon for the first time, are a treasury. I have heard much colorful, expressive, and economical language from people with little formal education. But what I am saying is that if the level of English that we speak and write declines, we decline with it.

The worst affliction from which English now suffers is bloating. It has, unfortunately, become typical of American English that enough is almost never enough. Both the *New York Daily News* and *CBS News* have told us about people who have been not merely

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strangled but “strangled to death.” Anybody undergoing that process would then not be a living survivor. The *New York Times* was unhappy about something that Israel did “without prior warning to the United States.” Maybe the Israelis intended to warn us about it afterwards. I have heard television news programs about a “self-avowed racist” and about a “self-confessed murderer.” A couple of “self-confessed trouble-makers” turned up in the *New York Times*, just as though somebody else could confess for you. You hear of a proposal that has been “affirmatively approved.” An educator turns writing into “articulating on paper.” Vocabulary becomes “new word acquisition.” Where’s the advantage? I may be accused of nit picking. This is not nit picking. When words are plain, specific, and easily understood and do the job, why not let them?

This language is deplorable, not only because much of it is wrong, but because it is leaden, it is awkward, it groans with false dignity. We have losing money or being in the red turned into “negative cash flow.” We have the Department of Energy telling us not that it has a plan ready but that it has “pre-implemented a plan to a state of shelf-readiness.” The head of the Public Television Station in New York does not say that corporate sponsors will get more time at the beginning and end of programs; they will have “enhanced corporate identity.” And the station doesn’t call the ten-second commercials it runs commercials; they are “programmed support spots.”

What is it that makes so many Americans speak this way? Why don’t we say “money” instead of “funding”? Why not say we were wrong rather than “our predictive assessments proved inadequate”? When a show is repeated on television, it is not a repeat, it is an “encore presentation.” When the Navy was asked why it had installed an \$18,000 sectional sofa in the ward room of the destroyer *Kidd*, the answer was not “to make the officers more comfortable.” The sofa was put there for “habitability improvement.”

Now, what makes this language attractive to those who use it is that it introduces an unnecessary abstruseness, it introduces overtones of profundity. The more difficult and complex you can make your job sound, the more money you’re likely to get for doing it, and the more prestige you’re likely to have. Business men and business women will

actually go to lectures to learn about “how to establish long-term changes in culture and technology through a transition parallel structure utilizing an open systems perspective,” and to hear about “future-focused route process” and “decision-making processes based on synergistic convergence.” Well, this mumbo-jumbo is put forward with straight-faced seriousness, much of it, I think, to impress, to intimidate and to make what is being done seem impenetrable and vastly technical.

In January of this year I spoke at a conference of the Department of Commerce in Washington that was called to encourage the use of plain English in business. One of the questions discussed was how to gather evidence that abandoning jargon and using plain English would make businesses more efficient and save them money. Now, imagine having to justify the use of comprehensible English. And yet, seven states have found it necessary to pass plain language laws governing various contracts. Twenty-six states have laws requiring plain language in insurance policies. You can see what we could save if government papers were written in straight-forward English, economically and to the point. It would surely be a worthwhile sum. Take a small example. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration is paying a private company \$23,000 to draw up a letter to be sent to people whose cars are being recalled for repairs. \$23,000. Representative John Bryant of Texas asked the head of the agency, Raymond Peck, why he couldn't write the letter himself. “I'm not skilled in linguistics,” he replied.

The fact that relatively few Americans take part in politics or even bother to vote may have something to do with the language of the politicians. Ask yourself, “What has happened to that great American institution, the wise crack, that deflator of pomposity and self-importance? Where has it gone?” How can you have wise cracks in a world where politicians, who once had said they wanted to become better known, now speak of “improving their name recognition factor”? A politician will not say that he is looking for help in running for office; he says instead that he “intends to begin developing the necessary support mechanism.” And why does he want to be elected? So he can “exercise a leadership role.” Why, then, is so much windy and flabby language used? Self-importance, of

course, and to give the impression that something is being said when, in reality, nothing is, but also because it serves as a fence that keeps others outside and respectful, and it leads them to ignore what's going on inside because it is too much trouble to find out. For those who are inside, either effect is useful.

So, you have the computer people with their "longitudinal redundancy check characters," and "concatenated data sets," "binary incremental representations," and "non-polarized return to zero" recordings. When the names of people who have died are removed from the Social Security and Medicare computers, this is known as "death termination interface." In some computer establishments, the window where you take work to be done, that is to say, the work window, is called the "Input-Output User Access Facility."

Some of the worst offenders are in education. They come from a world in which a contributor to the *Journal of Political Economy* tells his colleagues that money spent on narcotics is often obtained through robbery and stealing or, as he puts it, "the clandestine or coercive extraction of unwillingly surrendered transfer payments." It is a world where, if people of various ages are involved, "cross generational orientation" is said to have been achieved. It is the sheer gabble that is so distressing. They talk about "structured sequential curricula," "critical thought skills," and "skills continuum," "co-operative inter-disciplinary planning that stresses concept links," "purposeful goal-oriented experiences that build toward concept attainment." Let's pause for a moment to remember that we are talking about teaching, teaching children and young people. How can they be taught by anybody who talks about improving their self-concept and increasing their friendship skills? When the New York State Department of Education recommended that students be taught something about the Olympics, it suggested that "Olympism" be used as "infusion units."

Here is a typical title of a doctoral dissertation in the field known as "School Library Media": "The Effects of Alternative Diffusion Channels and Alternative Organizational Positions Of Receivers Of Diffusion Information Upon Receiver Understanding And Practitioner Utilization Of An Educational Innovation." Plain English would now be an educational innovation. How can anybody be

taught by anyone who takes this nonsense seriously?

As these last few remarks suggest, it is not only the bloating of the language and the pomposity and the spread of jargon that are the problems. Running parallel with the bloating process has been another in which the view got around that precise and correct language did not much matter and that those who thought it worthwhile to write and spell well were snobs who wanted to conceal their true feelings. According to this view, what mattered for young people was that they relate to others and that they develop skills of social interaction and self-management, and healthy interpersonal attitudes.

This was welcomed by many people in education for a number of reasons. One was that it made their jobs easier. There was less writing to deal with and, so, less correcting to do. And, because they did not have to teach correct English, they did not have to know correct English. Again, less work. It was a faddish thing, and of course fads are always attractive or they would not have come into being. Beyond that, many people in education genuinely believed that so-called standard English did not matter. Some went beyond that and accepted the idea that it was undesirable in itself.

There was much that was understandable in the revulsion against good English. To begin with, those who insisted on it placed themselves in opposition to many of the strongest trends in American life and risked cutting themselves off from those around them. Then, there was a natural sympathy with Blacks who were being brought into the mainstream of American education and who, in many cases, used English in distinctive ways, often incorrect. Some allowance had to be made for the disabilities they had suffered, and that became a factor in teaching in many places. There was also the great ethnic flowering in the United States, in clinging to the English used by immigrants, and that English inevitably was not an advanced form of the language, was not a subtle use of the language.

It is not for me to tell people not to be "proud of their heritage," in a phrase one often hears nowadays, if that is what they want to be. But, taken as a whole, the glorification of what was once called "hyphenated Americanism" does not do much for the language. I am not speaking

EDWIN NEWMAN

19

of borrowings from the tongues of those who came and are coming to this country, which can be colorful and vivid and useful. I am speaking of an attitude.

Of course, I know that there are groups of people in this country who need special help, and that is what bilingual education is about, but it should not become an end in itself, which is, unfortunately, what is likely to happen if these programs become embedded in government. There is no implication here that English is superior to Spanish or to any other language. What is implied is that English is the language of this country and ought to be accepted as such. There are advantages for all of us if many Americans have more than one language, but English has to be first for a simple and obvious reason. We are a nation with an unusual number of forces making for division — regional forces, economic forces, racial, religious, historic, and others. English and the willingness of immigrants to learn it, indeed the eagerness of immigrants to learn it as a way to get ahead socially, economically, and politically, has been one of the unifying factors in this country and it can still be.

Now, to understand what has happened to American English, you have to take into account the rebelliousness of the 60s and early 70s. The rebellion against rules took in the rules of language. Largely because of Vietnam (to a lesser extent because of Watergate and the Civil Rights and environmental movements), age, experience, and position came into disrepute. Anything that appeared to have rules imposed from above came into disrepute. That included language. People wanted their insides to speak for them. But that is not our inside strong suit.

Now there is, in addition, television. It is not only that words are so often subordinated to pictures, and it is not only that so much of the language is poor and wrong. More important, I think, is the fact that what is said is ignored, and can be ignored, and has to be ignored if watching the programs is to be tolerable. If you actually listen to what is said during a typical sports broadcast you will be reduced to idiocy by the end of it. And this outpouring of unnecessary talk, which is worse on radio, where the disc jockey flourishes, devalues the language.

How important is all of this? It cannot help the United States if the American people are incompetent. When it comes to English, I am not arguing that rules must be slavishly obeyed, and I do not say that rules must never be broken or changed. That would be silly. They are going to be broken and changed. The force of events of all kinds guarantees that. But not all change is desirable. Some of it ought to be resisted. And rules cannot simply be tossed aside without consequences. We know that we have been turning out, year after year, classes of young people of whom astonishing numbers cannot spell, punctuate, write, or read well enough to fill out simple forms. The Armed Forces have a terrible time finding young men and women who are literate enough to do what soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines have to do these days. There has been some improvement lately, but only because of the recession. A physician who examines candidates for places at a leading New York hospital told me that the English of these medical school graduates is pathetic. It makes him despair.

Well, this is beginning to sink in around the country. Some colleges and universities are giving courses to freshmen so that they will be able to write simple sentences. Nineteen states now have laws requiring prospective teachers to pass minimum competence tests before they are certified. Now that may sound fanciful, but in the town of Selida in Colorado, teachers in the elementary school were asked to suggest words for a spelling bee. Among the suggestions were *feable*, *humerous*, *brillient*, *formorly*, and *bookeeping*. California recently discovered that at least one-quarter of its teachers could not do simple arithmetic or write a paragraph free of mistakes in grammar. California is now giving prospective teachers (they could not get a law through covering current teachers) tests in reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Does anybody believe that this country or any other is overflowing with rude geniuses prevented from writing by bothersome rules? Rules, as I have said, will change, they are being bent, they will be broken, but if you want to bend them and break them in an interesting and provocative way, it helps to know what they are. Natural writers, so-called, who travel along paths rarely traversed before, are few and far between.

EDWIN NEWMAN

21

Still another accusation made against me is that I make altogether too much fuss about grammar. What difference does it make, this argument goes, so long as people can make themselves understood. Why shouldn't people say "ain't" and "he don't"? Well, about "ain't" and "he don't," as things stand now, they're wrong and because they are wrong, they grate on the ear. In itself, this is a minor matter, but the principle is a large one. Correct English is usually more precise than incorrect English, and is, therefore, more useful. And, by the way, those who maintain that "ain't" and "he don't" are acceptable are not often heard using them. Someone may tell me that the world is changing, that our country is changing, and that one of the changes is this: that language is giving way to other forms of communication, that this is a multi-media age. There is something in that. Something. But language remains indispensable. It is still the method we use for the formulation and communication of most ideas.

My critics sometimes refer to me with no great originality as a "linguistic Chicken Little," somebody who is making a mean-spirited attempt to turn language into a museum exhibit. Far from it. Language will change. Of course it will change, and I am trying to have some influence on the way it changes. It is all being made much too complicated, and I'm saying that a nation awash in jargon, pomposity, and opaque language on the one hand, and awash in semi-literacy on the other, is not healthy. It is damaging itself.