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AT THE HEART OF COMMUNICATION
across disciplines and around the world

Plain Language in the Global Village

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Plain Language in the Global Village

Back in the early days of USENET Newsgroups, I remember a consensus that, with the coming of international connectivity, world peace was sure to follow. We would all get to know each other better, and so we would all get along.

When we think of email lists these days, the discussion is not usually of their remarkable peacefulness, but of why there is so much flaming on the Web.

What went wrong?

There is a lesson in this for plain language practitioners. Winston Churchill summed it up when he called America and England "two nations divided by a common language."

We do not all think alike. There are real cultural differences. When there are genuine differences, clarity will mean dispute. Diplomats are not notorious, traditionally, for plain speech.

This does not mean plain speech should be avoided in international communications. It does mean we must be sensitive to some new issues.

Phatic communication

One is indeed diplomacy. Look at three examples of a sentence with the same informational content:

Wait in the outer office.

Wait in the outer office, please.

Would you wait in the outer office?

Would you mind waiting in the outer office?

Each sentence is longer than the last. Only the first obviously follows Strunk's famous command, to "Omit needless words."(1)

Yet the additional words are only needless if you think of language as a tool for communicating facts. The longer sentences actually do contain additional value. Can we say what it is?

Politeness, surely. Almost always, in every language, degrees of politeness are expressed by greater formal complexity and less clarity. This is because, as diplomats know, clarity and straightforwardness, bluntness, make disagreements and the disagreeable more obvious.

Polite or diplomatic speech violates the rules of plain language, taken completely literally.

But besides the likelihood of disagreement between cultures, politeness, or more broadly what we call the phatic or emotional element of communication, is also far more important in most other cultures than it is in English. Anglo-Saxons are, to be blunt, unusually blunt.

Here is a lovely example, a poster from the Butuan airport, in the Philippines. It is purely phatic.

What is a Filipino Policeman?

A Filipino policeman is a protector and friend of the people. His badge is a symbol of the citizens' faith and trust, his uniform a mirror of decorum and integrity and his whole human person an oblation of enduring love for homeland, fellowmen and God.

A Filipino policeman emulates the valor of Lapu-Lapu, the serenity of Rizal, the leadership of Aguinaldo, the courage of Bonifacio, the idealism of del Pilar, the wisdom of Mabini and the fortitude of Gomez, Burgos, and Zamora.

A Filipino policeman has an oath for his republic to uphold: to defend the constitution, honour the flag, obey the laws and duly constituted authorities. He has a covenant with his people to comply: to safeguard and protect them even beyond the call of duty. And he has a legacy for his family to fulfill: to bequeath unto them the one and only treasure of his life--an unblemished name.

How would you edit this for plain language? If you boiled it down for information, you would have almost nothing left: "A Filipino policeman should be a protector and friend of the people." Full stop.

This would clearly be wrong, and meaningless, in Filipino culture.

I would tinker only with the last paragraph, and for the sake of grammatical correctness as much as plain language: "A Filipino policeman swears an oath to his republic," and, in the second sentence, "He has a covenant with his people: to safeguard and protect..."; "And he leaves a legacy to his family: the one and only treasure of his life..."

Everything else might be debatable, but not on grounds of plain language. It all serves a phatic purpose, and the phatic use of language is essential in other cultures.

Metaphors, Idioms, and Cliches

George Orwell's very first rule for plain language is this: "Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print." (2)

One of the first Canadian English teachers to go to China, after its opening in the 1970s, tried to enforce this with their writing students.

The Chinese were shocked. Their response was: "Don't you Canadians have any respect for your ancestors?"

We don't. Similarly, in poetry competitions in Japan, you commonly lose points for not mentioning plum blossoms. In a Canadian poetry competition, conversely, you would lose points for mentioning the rosy-fingered dawn.

Clearly, there is a cultural difference here. Cultural relativists may simply want to jump ship on plain language at this point. Oriental and many other foreign cultures love idiom and genre. We, in imposing the plain style, are in fact imposing our cultural values. I think there's no way around that.

But we are already imposing it, by trying to communicate at all. As soon as we seek to communicate with a foreign reader, or one not of our own culture, we are imposing our preference for internationalism, pluralism, and communications. Other cultures do not in fact all agree that this is valuable. Many cultures in the past have in fact tried to maintain complete isolation from the wider world. Korea, Tibet, Japan, and China all sought to cut themselves off for centuries.

So it is not plain language that is imposing the cultural values, so much as the very desire for communication.

As soon as you consent to the value of international communication, the Chinese view is wrong. This does not mean Chinese culture is wrong; but Chinese culture does not favour international communication.

It is necessary, for practical purposes, to strip out all standard metaphors or idioms when writing for a multicultural market. Idioms—cliches if you prefer—require and assume a shared culture. Idioms are what a non-native speaker is least likely to understand. They cannot be looked up in a dictionary. And they are impossible obstacles for machine translation.

Worst of all, when they are transferred to another culture, they can look absurd or give a very different meaning. This is where a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.

Chinese culture suffers bad press internationally because of its love of idiom; as do Japanese and Korean culture as well. It commonly makes literally translated dispatches look absurd. Who can forget the celebrated Cold War phrase "running dogs of imperialism"? Such are an easy butt of humour; and they unfairly evoke a kind of group mind control.

A Doonesbury cartoon demonstrates. Honey (can I assume a certain level of shared cultural context here?) has prepared a bumper sticker for Duke's presidential campaign. It reads, in ringing Chinese style, "The people rejoice at the imminent wiping out of the two pests and their lackeys."

It probably wouldn't play in Peoria.

So plain language has a cultural and a political agenda. This is a plain fact. Orwell, at least, was completely aware of this aspect of plain language. He was a political animal, on the animal farm, and he saw plain language as a protection against oppressive politics. Remember the title of his seminal essay on the subject: "Politics and the English Language." It's as plain as that. Since then, the history of the plain language movement has been a history of promoting openness in government.

The elimination of "cliche," or standard phrases, is in particular an explicitly political tool. Stock phrases favour conservatism, which is to say, conventional wisdom. Most cultures value conventional wisdom, conservatism, more than the modern West. We do not respect our ancestors to that extent.

African-American culture is an example. As a piece floating around on the Internet outlines, cliches are necessary to writing the blues, the classic expression of the African-American soul. Rule number one: "Most blues begin 'woke up this morning.'" Rule number 5: "Blues cars are Chevies and Cadillacs. Other acceptable blues transportation is Greyhound bus or a southbound train." Rule number 4 says it all: "The blues are not about limitless choice." (3)

In sum, the drive for originality in language, and indeed the shunning of polite forms, reinforces a favourable view toward change in political and social spheres, and toward human equality.

We cannot separate this from plain language, it seems to me, and so we just have to face the moral choice: do we have the right to assume these are absolute values.

Can we live with this? For there will be opposition. As the US discovered in Viet Nam, some cultures don't want this; or at the very least, remain unconvinced.

But this is only one aspect of a broader dilemma. Do we believe in human rights? If we do not believe in human rights as universal, we do not believe in human rights at all: that is what

holding them as "self-evident" and "inalienable" means. If they can be legitimately withheld from Afghans by their government, because of cultural differences, they can legitimately be withheld from blacks in America, or Jews in Germany, as well.

Do we believe in progress? If we do not think it is possible or of value, we are never going to change the world for the better.

Do we believe there is a truth? If not, plain language is beside the point. So is communication.

Your call.

Art for Art's Sake

Another source of cultural misunderstanding is the varying value placed on the aesthetics of language: the choice of a word, not because it is the shortest one to convey the desired datum, but because it is a beautiful word. I present as exhibit number one, my own wedding invitation, composed by my wife, who is Filipina. Two participants, it reports, will "Light our path to righteousness": they carried candles, as I recall. Four committed to "shower our aisle with flowers of prosperity"; these might also, I believe, have in some locales been called flower girls.

This is an open violation, surely, of the plain language principle taken literally. Yet such a supposition that beauty has no intrinsic value historically emerges from a specifically Protestant cultural ethic. It is of a piece with the Calvinist disapproval of dancing, card-playing, and colourful dress. Any Catholic country has a taste for language as decoration. Look at anything written or spoken in Ireland, for example.

Can six million Irishmen be wrong? Four Nobel Prizes for Literature argue no.

There is, however, such a thing as a plain style for ornamental writing: this is no contradiction. There is a difference, in art, between elegance, which is true beauty, and empty ornament. Anthony Burgess offers to my mind a ready model of elegance, in a Catholic writer. Do others remember his subtitles for the movie *Cyrano de Bergerac*, all in rhyme?

Or consider the first paragraph from *A Clockwork Orange*:

There was me, that is, Alex, and my three droogs, that is, Pete, Georgie, and Dim, Dim being really dim, and we sat in the Korova Milkbar making up our rassoodocks what to do with the evening, a flip dark chill winter bastard though dry. The Korova Milkbar was a milk-plus mesto, and you may, O my brothers, have forgotten what these mestos were like. (4)

It may be just me. But that strikes me as a paragraph no Protestant writer would have composed. They wouldn't have bothered. There is a plain love of language for the beauty of it, as you find in Joyce. Consider the display of linguistic virtuosity: an entire novel in the first person in an invented dialect. Listen to the sound of "Korova milkbar" or "milk-plus mesto." Pure beauty. Yet at the same time, the paragraph is perfectly concise.

There are, indeed, repetition and literally unnecessary words. Who needs to hear, for example, "Dim, Dim being really dim," in terms of pure factual information? It could all be inferred from the first word alone. But it is not empty verbiage: besides the beauty of the sounds, here, to use a phrase coined by another fine Catholic writer, the medium is the message: repetition of the obvious expresses aptly the essential meaning of the subject, "dim." Shakespeare, also commonly considered culturally Catholic, does something similar when his Hamlet speaks of a "windy suspiration of forc'd breath"--in other words, a breathy breath of breathing.

Long-winded? That's the point.

So the plain language practitioner must not confuse plainness with stripping out aesthetic values, especially when moving outside of the White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant milieu. No; the rule here, to be clear, should be, not, "omit needless words," but "omit words not serving at least one purpose." True conciseness requires this as a minimum; merely transmitting factual information is, to a good writer, not enough.

And, once again, most other cultures seem to value the beauty of language more highly than the Anglo-Saxon. Arabic culture, for example; the Korean classic *Chunhyang* is notably flowery in translation, to a Canadian ear.

Sound Qualities

Some very good writers, in my experience, object to being edited. When they do, the problem is almost always the same: fear of sound qualities being damaged. When you omit needless words, you should remember that words otherwise needless may be there to preserve a certain rhythm of speech.

South Asians, for example, speak English very quickly. They are able to do this, and to understand, because their English is heavily rhythmic, and because they favour complex stress patterns: dactyls and anapests.

I choose a business communication almost at random to illustrate.

Note the stresses in this first sentence of the second paragraph: where would you put them?

I have **eight** years of **experience** in **administration**, **two** years in **software development**, and **eight** months in **technical recruiting**. As **Marketing Manager** I have **successfully** placed **consultants**...

This is a random sample from a non-professional writer. But it is distinctly anapestic.

In order to maintain a dactylic or anapestic rhythm, that is, a rhythm of three or more beats, it is almost essential to use Latinate, polysyllabic words. Short Anglo-Saxon words stress the first syllable, forcing a one- or two-beat foot.

Therefore, any use of complex rhythms goes directly against Orwells' command, to "never use a long word where a short one will do." White, similarly, argues for Anglo-Saxon words when available.

But such South Asian writers are doing the right thing, in terms of true "plain language." If the point of language is communication, then note: any number of studies show that a regular rhythm improves understanding, speed of reading, and, as important, retention. This could be a critical advantage in, say, a technical communication. Whether we know it or not, we all sound out what we read, if only in the mind's ear.

And so sound qualities are a part of clear language. A steadily rhythmic passage with Latinate words could well be easier to understand than a passage of shorter or more familiar words with no rhythm. And a multi-syllabic rhythm may actually allow faster data transfer.

Any plain language practitioner should remember this, regardless of whom he is writing for; but especially when writing for other cultures. Many other cultures more deeply value and attend to sound qualities and rhythms of speech than Anglos often do.

Performativity

Another aspect of writing easily overlooked in international contexts is its ritual use. Once again, this is a matter of English emerging from an essential Protestant culture, in which ritual is held of little value.

Yet it is not only Catholics who are sensitive to the ritual use of language, its "performativity." In the Hebrew scriptures, God creates with words; and one must not, in turn, speak the name of G-d. Almost any hunter-gatherer society is deeply sensitive to language as ritual. So is Oriental culture, thanks to Confucius.

This is something we in North America are unlikely to see, and it creates misunderstanding.

A typical dispatch from Beijing serves as our example. It makes us want to laugh: Lee Teng-Hui, it asserts, is a "rat running across the street with everybody shouting 'smack it.'" His name stinks. He is a "fake president," "the number one scum of the nation," and, moreover, a "deformed test tube baby cultivated in the political laboratory of hostile anti-Chinese forces.(5)"

Golly. Important information, right?

Our first inclination is to call this childish, call it name-calling, think it makes China look foolish and impotent.

This is because we miss the performativity or ritual use of language. Note what China is protesting here: Taiwan's president of the time, Lee Teng-Hui, had declared that China's relationship with Taiwan should be on a "state-to-state basis." This is ritually significant; it is verbal independence. And China is replying with measured force, in kind, just as would seem ritually appropriate: a sharp counterattack of words. This is fighting fire with fire; or incense with incense.

Now, when we read this Chinese passage directly translated, and laugh, we should bring ourselves up short. Here we are indeed divided by common language: the Beijing response makes perfect sense given their cultural assumptions about language, but we are quite blind to the intended meaning, and see something different.

Consider carefully: we are just as likely to be sending just as confused a signal when we use plain language in the traditional English sense for communicating with China, without being sensitive to the performative or ritual significance of our words.

An example in which this happened: San Francisco columnist Mort Sahl once, in his column, referred to a socialite appearing with a Samoan escort at a party. "Samoan?" he wrote. He thought he was writing a throwaway gag line. "What's a Samoan? I know what a samoyed is..."

Unfortunately, he had just called the man a dog. This is news in Samoa. This is a terrible insult in Samoa. There was actually a contract taken out on Sahl's life. He had to appear before a formal assembly of Samoan chieftains and abjectly, ritually apologize.

Words are deeds, in much of the world. Plain language practitioners must be careful to remember this, and to take it into account. Imagine striking a word for brevity and thereby destroying the effectiveness of the spell.

The moral of the story is, miss a step in this new global village dance, and a contract may be taken out on you as well.

Conclusion:

But there is good news: the humble scribe has never been more important. Those of us who know the language well in all its aspects are far more necessary in this global village than we ever were before. The task of communicating plainly and clearly is has never been more difficult, and the penalty for failure has never been greater.

Never, to quote Churchill once again, in the history of human communications, have so many owed so much to so few.

Endnotes

- (1) Strunk, William, and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style*, NY: Macmillan, 1959, chapter heading.
- (2) Orwell, George, "Politics and the English Language," *Inside the Whale and Other Essays*, Harnondworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1957.
- (3) "How to Sing the Blues," attributed to Memphis Earlene Gray with help from Uncle Plunky. Provenance otherwise unknown.
- (4) Burgess, Anthony, *A Clockwork Orange*, Cutchogue, NY : Buccaneer Books, c1962.
- (5) "China Says Taiwan President a Rat Hated by All," Reuters, 4:09 am ET, August 22, 1999.

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