

Writing and speaking painlessly by David Woods

George Orwell, whose style was plain and spare, observed that any rules for clear expression -- even the ones that he suggested in his famous essay *Politics and the English Language* -- should be broken if they force one to say anything barbarous.

What often lies between what people want to say or write, and what they actually do say or write, is an inadequate grasp of language. This grasp can be tightened by reading the great writers, the choice of whom is obviously a very subjective one . . . but might include Graham Greene, Somerset Maugham and, of course, Orwell, if one's purpose is to learn and adopt clarity and simplicity.

Mortimer Adler refers in his book *How to Speak, How to Listen* to conversational speaking, and has marvellous suggestions for subjects to be avoided in conversation, and which, if adopted universally, would enhance the social lives of millions. They are: one's state of health or recent surgical operation; one's babies and their cute little tricks; one's children and their brilliant accomplishments, and one's domestic pet, unless it happens to be an elephant, an alligator, or a boa constrictor.

Adler names three factors in persuasive speaking -- ethos, pathos and logos. Ethos consists in establishing the speaker's credibility and credentials; pathos consists in arousing the passions of the listeners, getting their emotions running in the direction of the action to be taken, and logos is the marshalling of reasoning.

Speaking in public is North America's number one fear and, quite apart from its potential hazards to an audience . . . the protagonist may suffer in varying degrees from palpitations, dry mouth, wobbly knees, shaking hands, sweaty brow and Niagaran armpits. Psychologically, the fear is of "drying up", and above all of looking foolish before one's fellow human beings. But prospective speakers would do well to remember that their audience is just a group of individuals . . . an audience of a hundred people is made up of individuals, any one of whom you can talk with individually. Talk to the group as one person. Public speakers have, after all, been invited to speak and, if they know their material, know themselves, and know the audience, there is a reasonable chance that all will go well.

Since nobody can escape having butterflies in the stomach, the best they can hope to do is to get them to fly in formation. One technique is to convene a group of adults each of whom is required to stand up and speak extemporaneously on a subject with which he is familiar. Mortimer Adler's advice to speakers is to use detailed notes rather than a complete text. Not everyone would agree. William F. Buckley, Jr., one of North America's most accomplished orators and debaters, says: "My own feeling is that a proper speech should be polished, and to which end I tend to write mine out". Winston Churchill apparently had the best of both worlds -- writing his speeches out completely, but telling them with all kinds of hesitancy and repetitions built in.

So far as writing is concerned, Orwell refers to the mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence that is the most marked characteristic of modern English

prose . . . which he says consists less and less of words chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of phrases tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated henhouse. He warns against worn out metaphors like having no axe to grind or having grist to the mill; he of course mentions mixed metaphors, giving as an example "the Fascist octopus has sung its swan song"; he urges avoiding the passive voice and such noun constructions as by examination instead of the gerund 'by examining'. Parenthetically, Webster's Dictionary uses as an example of the gerund -- 'Writing is easy'. The example may be correct; the contention decidedly is not. And anyway, Orwell calls for eliminating phrases such as having regard to, in view of . . . and for avoiding such foreign phrases as *status quo*, unless there's absolutely no English equivalent.

Above all, Orwell calls for sincerity, simplicity and concreteness. The great enemy of clear language, he says, is insincerity. He suggests that political language consists largely of euphemism, question begging and cloudiness. Example: "defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets - this is called pacification."

Orwell gives a wonderful example of the decay of the language. He starts by quoting a well-known verse from Ecclesiastes: "I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all." He translates this into modern English, as follows: "Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account".