

The ethics of everyday language

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Intro

When we think about ethical language, what mostly leaps to mind are examples of corporate or political spin.

Spectacular as these might be, they often affect our lives far less directly than the everyday public language we encounter at work, in the supermarket, or at our local school.

Take something as simple as the family holiday.

Picture an average mum, dad and kids heading off to Tasmania on the new ferry service. They turn up at the quay to find their ship isn't there. So mum starts to read the fine print on the conditions of carriage, and it sounds like this:

The TT-Line reserves the right at any time to substitute one vessel for another to abandon or alter any voyage either before the commencement or at any time during the course thereof to dispatch the vessel before or after the date or hour advertised or announced for her sailing from any port to deviate from any advertised route for any purpose with liberty to sail without pilots, to proceed via any route, to proceed, return to and stay at any ports whatsoever (including the loading port) in any order in or out of the route or in contrary direction to or beyond the port of destination...

And this is only the first part of a 250-word, virtually unpunctuated sentence, which in turn rambles on for more than five and a half very dense pages.

Standing dockside with baggage in hand, our family is confronting the language of law. They have plenty of time to decipher the code, as their boat had in fact ‘dispatched’ before the advertised ‘commencement’. They think the text boils down to ‘Well, you’ve got a ticket, but we don’t actually have to take you anywhere’.

So our family is not sure if they have any redress, nor how to pursue it even if they did. And they’re rather worried about what it might mean to head ‘in contrary direction to or beyond the port of destination’, particularly if the company takes up its ‘liberty to sail without pilots’.

Now the lawyer who wrote this text would argue that said language is necessary to be legally precise. In a dispute, a judge fully invested in that code would know exactly what it meant, and that will keep the company safe from litigation.

And this is where we find our ethical problem: this text wasn’t written for our family, nor for anyone else boarding the Spirit of Tasmania. It was written to protect the interests of one party at the expense of another.

An equal conversation

If our public language is to be ethical, it needs to provide for a more equal participation in every transaction, whether in the mechanics workshop or at the local shop, at the insurance office or in the doctor’s office. Too often, the language deliberately turns what should be a conversation into a monologue.

The American television journalist Toni Seiple tells a disturbing story about going to her doctor with pain in her abdomen. It turned out that her uterus had prolapsed, or slipped out of place. Her doctor told her, ‘We can fix that. It’s an easy repair’, and booked her in for surgery.

At the hospital, Toni found the ‘Informed Consent’ form almost unreadable. Nervous enough about her procedure, she simply could not concentrate on such a long, intimidating and confusing text. But she recalled what her doctor had said about this being an easy fix, and so she signed the form.

Only after the operation did she discover that her easy surgical ‘repair’ had in fact been a total hysterectomy.

Contrast that with my own experience of going in for a scan of a worrisome lump. The author of my ultrasound report wrote ‘this should be treated as a tumour until proven otherwise’. Now that’s pretty clear, and it gave me plenty to discuss with my doctor.

Like Toni Seiple’s physician, he initially responded rather condescendingly: ‘don’t worry, the lump will probably go away, but if you insist, we can send you off to see a surgeon.’ I insisted, and within 24 hours I was on the operating table.

Now the language in this case had allowed me to be a more equal participant in the process in a way that it hadn’t for Toni Seiple. If the technician had written ‘the results are indicative of potential malignant activity in the lower limb’, the chances of me understanding the severity and insisting on further action would have narrowed.

I had a conversation. Toni experienced a monologue. As William Hazlitt wrote, ‘the art of conversation is the art of hearing as well as being heard’.

So how can we maximise the chances of more equal conversations in our daily commerce? I want to suggest two simple rules for a more ethical language of public exchange:

1. Say what you mean.
2. Mean what you say.

Say what you mean

To say what you mean is the more obvious of the two. When a lift repair company was working in an office building, it posted a notice saying:

To enhance the performance of the vertical transportation, we wish to advise that the lifts are going through a readjustment program.

Why could they not write ‘we’re sorry for the delay, but we need to work on the lifts’?

A colleague of mine was once editing an engineer’s report, which was explaining a construction project to a non-technical reader. One passage detailed how a pipe would need to be sprayed with cement until it *attained negative bouyancy*. She edited this to read *until it sank*. No, the engineer argued, it must read until it *attained negative bouyancy*. So it didn’t sink? Well, yes. So we can write sink? No, because technically it *attained negative bouyancy*. And so it went.

These authors are more intent on sounding impressive, on elevating their own status rather than conversing with their readers.

Ironically, the tier of government closest to the people is one of the worst offenders. Here’s a letter my local council sent when I wrote about the noise from a neighbour’s swimming pool pump.

Reference is made to your customer service request in relation to noise from the pool pump at the above-mentioned address.

In this regard please be advised that the owner of the subject property has been reminded of the permitted hours of operation for pool pumps in accordance with the Protection of the Environment Operations Act 1997 (POEO).

The owners have also been requested to ensure the pump is enclosed within a specified time-frame. This matter will be monitored by Council and should the matter remain outstanding Council will consider its options action under the POEO.

This is the language of officialese, and it has been the norm for centuries in the language of commerce, of government, of the law and in the academy. It is an anti-democratic language because it places unnecessary barriers between our institutions and the people that they serve.

Leaving aside the question of how my neighbour could physically enclose a pump 'within a specified timeframe', let alone what exactly an 'options action' might be, why couldn't the council just write:

Thank you for your letter about noise from your neighbour's swimming pool pump. We have reminded your neighbours of the hours that the law permits them to operate the pump, and have given them a deadline to enclose the pump to reduce its noise. Council officers will monitor the situation and consider further action if this does not happen.

Not only is this clearer and more human, it is also forty per cent shorter. Imagine reading forty per cent fewer words every time you received a letter from the Council, or your bank, or your insurer, or your telephone company!

But the ethics of public language go beyond efficiency. Sometimes language that does not say what it means can disenfranchise a reader altogether.

A study in the US Department of Veteran's Affairs illustrates the point perfectly. Each year this Department receives several hundred new requests for a particular veteran's benefit. It replies with a standard letter, then has counsellors available to help applicants by telephone. In one year, for 750 letters sent out, the Department received 1,128 calls. That's approaching two calls for every letter. Applicants only have 60 days before their claim is denied, and many of them found the letter so hard to follow that they missed the deadline.

When the department improved its language, it sent out its new letter 710 times, and received only 192 calls. The veterans now found the document effective. They became more equal participants in the conversation because the letter finally said what it meant.

Mean what you say

My second guideline for an ethical public language is to mean what you say.

Our supermarkets are full of language that does just the opposite. For years I used to buy a 'light' olive oil thinking it was lower in fat, only to discover that the lightness actually referred to its colour. I almost bought a coffee substitute that offered 'real coffee taste'. Naturally, the word 'taste' appears in miniscule six-point type.

'Flavour' is another marketing favourite with our food manufacturers, particularly when it comes to fruit. So many products boast 'real fruit' in large letters, only to clarify with the word 'flavour' in reversed-out, yellow-on-white type underneath. And eating 'real fruit flavour' is nowhere near the same as eating 'real fruit'.

Look closely at the products in your shopping trolley. You will find that many of them use a similar sleight of design. They prominently say one thing, while the reality is something else.

Of course, as consumers, we have the choice to walk away from that conversation by not buying the product. At other times, we cannot answer back this way. If I had walked away from my doctor, for example, I wouldn't be walking around today.

In Sydney a few years ago, daily commuters on the Sydney system had no choice but to adjust to the new meaning for a late running train. Now to most of us, a train is late when it doesn't arrive on time. But in NSW, did you know that a train is now officially late only if it arrive 5 minutes after it was due? That's the definition that ministers use when they report on performance. But try telling that to your boss when you are late for that all important presentation.

You could render your explanation into management speak to make it sound reasonable while not really saying anything at all. How about something like this:

As a means of simultaneously decomposing both the optative and indicative parts of a transportation problem, from an abstract business level to concrete movement requirement, we leveraged the paradigm of rail in both approaches while maintaining traceability to high-level movement objectives.

This kind of language deliberately doesn't mean what it says. Its purpose is to bury reality altogether, to fill our conversations with hot air and kill off any genuine exchange.

The language of police-speak also does a good job of removing us from reality and diminishing our human connection. People never die in police reports, they are *persons who were found deceased*. Criminals don't run from police. They *are observed leaving the premises and proceeding rapidly in an easterly direction*.

Imagine if we used police speak as the language of our nursery rhymes. The tale of Little Miss Muffet on her tuffet would become:

A child or young person answering to the name of Muffet
was observed in proximity to a tuffet
in the act of consuming produce described as curds and whey
whereupon it is alleged that an offender of the appearance of a spider
loitered in a malicious manner in the vicinity of said juvenile
causing her to proceed rapidly from the premises in an agitated way.

This is what George Orwell called insincere or even anaesthetic language.

Here's what one Canberra bureaucrat actually wrote a couple of years ago:

Government failure is a technical term that rather than implying that governments have failed, it recognises that government objectives and information can change over time. Government failure is also referred to as government policy in chapter one of this report.

You have to stop and ask yourself: do they really mean that? Or is this a conscious effort to diminish our capacity to hold up our end of the conversation?

It is only when our public language both says what it means, and means what it says, that it will equalise the participation of writers and readers, of listeners and speakers.

And in our daily conversations, that is exactly what an ethical public language should strive to do.

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