

PLASTIC LANGUAGE

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As a newspaper reporter, I once had to write about a fire chief who lost his job. I called his boss, the city manager, and asked what happened.

“The chief has separated from his position with the city,” the manager told me.

“What do you mean separated?” I asked. In my mind, I saw scenes of a couple filing divorce papers, a chef working an egg yolk away from the white, a surgeon parting Siamese twins.

“All I can say is that the chief has separated from his position,” the city manager repeated, and he would not say anything more.

But he had said plenty already. While his odd and vague utterance did nothing to help my newspaper story, it spoke clearly of an American epidemic—the chronic molding, bending, and manufacturing of language to make the speaker sound informed and important while softening the hard truth, masquerading it as something it is not, or hiding it altogether. The words occupy plenty of space (in print or in the air) but offer no practical sense whatsoever, the way some foods merely fill the belly without providing a microgram of nutrition. This is plastic language— factory-made, quality-controlled non-words and pseudo-sentences carefully crafted to mask plain English. Those of us on the receiving end know something real lies behind what we see and hear, but we can’t say for sure what it is because the words sound so smooth, so pleasing, that we do not realize how far they have carried us from what we need to know. Meaning has separated from words.

The use of plastic language has become a fine art—and a lucrative one—for lawyers, computer gurus, and public relations “specialists.” It is standard equipment for ego-powered politicians, agenda-pushing generals, and profit-greedy corporate executives. These people expertly clamp phony casings around clear and direct talk, transforming sentences into products fashioned to look pleasing to the eye, sound soft to the ear, and land smoothly on unsuspecting minds. They turn nouns into verbs, use four syllables where one will do, and tack -ize and -ation onto any word that does not feel significant enough to stand alone. When the economy turns south, the people in charge never say, “It’s awful. Your best savings plan is to bury your money in the back yard and wait for better times.” Instead, we hear this: “The country has initiated movement to position itself into a corrective economic posture; therefore, individuals could potentially stabilize their positions by giving consideration to alternative investment strategies.”

This is communication once, or twice, removed. The strategy for the speaker or writer is simple: Say something, yet say nothing. Thicken the sentences. Bulk up the words. Stretch them, pull them, twist, spin, knead them until they’re flat and lifeless and malleable. Then reshape the meaning into what you want it to be—any contortion that will protect your

image, preserve your profits, and put off public scrutiny. Obfuscate. Deflect. Diffuse. Never mind that your audience will need a decoder to cut through to the message. Just cling to your motto: “If you can’t dazzle them with data, baffle them with bull.”

There are many reasons for going to all this trouble to make plastic language, and each is self-serving.

Some people do it because they want to sound a notch or two above ordinary. Determined to be free of the lexical limitations that, uh, limit us commoners, they cover their words in plastic to make themselves appear more prominent, more serious, more official. They do not merely speak. They make use of terminology. Politicians never talk about how to solve problems. Instead, they dialogue with the hope that a meaningful communication will enable them to arrive at an acceptable resolution. In fact, politicians do not deal with problems at all. They confront situations that they deem problematic and worthy of consideration.

Actually, there are no politicians anymore, only elected officials. And they don’t help the people in their districts; they provide constituent services. They are never wrong—just misunderstood, misquoted, misheard, or taken out of context. Elected officials do not spend tax money; they fund initiatives. They don’t take golf junkets to Florida in February; they participate in mid-winter fact-finding missions concerning turf athletics in the southeastern United States.

In the courtrooms of America, nobody simply talks. There, defendants enter pleadings, lawyers occupy the floor to make arguments, witnesses provide testimony, juries make findings, and judges determine, have the record show, sustain, overrule, and hereby declare. Those of us on the hear ye end of this need translators to help us through the stating, alleging, objecting, contending, direct examining, cross-examining, re-directing, stipulating, retracting, and ruling. All of this happens not in court but in the legal arena, a place that sounds as if the blindfolded Lady Justice walks a high wire above tigers on retainer and clowns carrying briefcases. Perhaps she does.

In the land of plastic language, nobody tears things down anymore. We deconstruct them.

Schools no longer teach. They provide an education. And the best schools do not stop there—they guide students to a comprehensive understanding.

We do not decide what is important to ourselves. We clarify personal values.

We don’t kick slobs out of parties. We disinvite undesirable guests from social gatherings.

Cars aren’t cars and trucks aren’t trucks. Anything on wheels is rolling stock. And if you want to buy used rolling stock, forget it—all you can get is a certified pre-owned vehicle.

The computer age has generated a plastic language all its own, and now anybody can sound like an electronic wizard at the flap of a tongue. Power up, log in, go on-line, download, upload, key in characters, process words, save a file to a floppy, recall data from the hard drive. Browse it. Surf it. Bookmark it. Tap it. Hack it. Delete it before the boss finds out. Sign onto your e-mail, click a link to some other cyber soul, and interface all night long. You might not know a keyboard from a washboard, but you can appear compu-cool if you talk the techno-talk.

Just as plastic language comes in handy for the showoffs and the self-important, it is an essential tool for powerful people who will not bring themselves to tell their untidy truths.

In the military, camouflaging the realities of the deadly business of battle requires as much strategic planning as does the combat itself. Note that there are no longer weapons for wars. There is only hardware for engaging in limited conflict. Generals used to send soldiers to fight the enemy. Now they mobilize readiness forces to respond to hostilities and uprisings. Kill people with tanks and bombs? Not anymore. Now troops secure staging areas and establish ground presence, then they deploy armored rolling stock to neutralize targets and activate air-to-ground sortie missions to de-populate urban areas. This is not war. It is an operational intervention to protect our national interests by bringing stability to regions of unrest. With enough firepower to make war sound harmless, plastic speaking might be the military's deadliest weapon.

In corporate America, where stock values soar and plunge on word of mouth, executives mass produce plastic language to hard-sell themselves as employee-friendly, ultra-efficient, and highly profitable, and then to soft-sell the news when workers strike, factories close, and companies go broke.

The business of modern business begins by manufacturing a new image of what we do every day at the office, on the assembly line, and in the shop: We don't go to work and do a job; we enter the work place environment and enjoy employment status. Gone are the familiar labels that describe what we have to do to make a living—no more personal sacrifice, no more dealing with deadwood co-workers, no more dog-eat-dog battles for promotions. Now we have individual effort, team cooperation, and healthy competition for upward mobility. No longer do we get pressure from foremen to meet quotas. Now we have supervisory incentives to reach pre-established output goals.

There are no jobs anymore, only employment positions. Workers used to have duties. Now associates own responsibilities in partnership with management. In the past, poorly paid workers suffered back-breaking manual labor. Today, wage-controlled associates experience the aerobic benefits of physical activity. Maybe your uncle broke rocks with a sledgehammer, but you—you disassemble geologic formations through the forced application of a lead-based instrument. Your uncle was paid as little as possible. You get the minimum wage.

When angry employees go on strike, the company calls it a job action prompted by a labor-relations issue that will create a temporary decline in productivity. When a business fires scores of workers, it says it is downsizing the employment structure. When a plant closes, the corporate news release labels it belt-tightening to solidify market placement. A chemical factory in my town once reported that a storage tank had failed, resulting in an involuntary process interruption. Translation: The tank exploded, a worker got hurt, and part of the factory had to shut down.

When a business loses millions in three months, it takes a quarterly economic downturn. When the company bleeds money quarter after quarter, it experiences negative cash flow. When the boss gets the ax for this sorry performance, he departs to explore alternative career opportunities. When he cannot get another job, he becomes a consultant.

At the office today, there is no schmoozing; now it's networking. We do not trade opinions; we solicit input and offer feedback.

Businesses and government agencies do not have problems. They carry concerns. And when there is a concern, the boss does not decide what to do, or even pick a committee to decide. Instead, a manager appoints a team to facilitate a study and offer recommendations for an appropriate response.

Bigwigs do not get fat raises. They receive equitable compensation packages to maintain their competitiveness in the marketplace.

The rich don't get richer. They grow money, create wealth, and enhance their financial security.

We do not use things anymore. We utilize products. And when the product we utilize is plastic language—when we separate meaning from words—we miscommunicate in ways we might never know.