

SOME DO NOT'S FOR ORATORICAL CLARITY

by

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PART FIVE: EUPHEMISM, SLANG, AND SHOPTALK

LEARN WHAT NOT TO DO!

As stated in Part One of this series treating oratorical clarity (See *Rostrum*, March 2002, p. 43), perhaps the most practical way to improve oratorical effectiveness is to emphasize what not to do. In other words, the orator should focus on those features which compete with clarity. Like the first four, this article does not treat every obstacle to clear thought, for such endeavor would be futile for any person. Instead, this article covers three of the most notorious obstacles and sufficiently warns the orator to examine carefully language usage. The author assumes from his

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teaching and coaching experience that, if the orator knows **what should not be done**, he or she will employ **what should be done**. This article stresses euphemism, slang, and shoptalk.

DON'T USE EUPHEMISM!

Words carry denotative and connotative meaning. Denotation refers to the direct, explicit meaning of a word. Connotation refers to the suggested meaning of a word. In other words, denotation generates fundamental information, whereas connotation introduces additional meaning and stimulates one's emotions favorably or unfavorably. With language one can *purr* by saying, for instance, that a woman is *petite*, *slender*, and *svelte*; or *snarl* by saying, for instance, that the woman is *skinny*, *boney*, or *a walking x-ray*.

Euphemism excels in purring, for it is the attempt to gain favorable impression by the substitution of an inoffensive, mild, or impressive expression for one that may offend or even shock. This method often appears in discussions on bodily functions, sex, and sociological problems. For example, in attempting not to be coarse or shocking, some speakers have substituted # 1 for urine; #2 for excre-

ment; *privates* for male or female sex organs; *lounge*, *comfort station*, or *restroom* for toilet; *evening's lady* or *fallen woman* for prostitute; *with child* for pregnant; *social infirmity*, *blood poison*, or *secret disease* for syphilis or AIDS; *being rehabilitated* for imprisoned; and *monetary disorder* for bankruptcy. The euphemisms are polite-sounding, but they can be deceiving.

Consider the young woman who applied for a lucrative secretarial position. During the interview the Personnel Director said, "Ms. Hubert, having worked here for over ten years, you know most of the officers. How would you characterize Mr. Frederichs? After all, you will be working with him quite a bit, if you should be given the position." The woman knew that the interviewer was a close friend of the man in question. Her intended thoughts would describe Mr. Frederichs as fat, sloppy, conceited, selfish, sarcastic, and fool-hardy. Instead, she sacrificed her intended thoughts for financial security and called her future boss stocky, fashionable, self-confident, thrifty, witty, and courageous. Needless to say, she was awarded the position, but she regretted the manner by which she got it.

In *The American Language*, H. L. Mencken well described how euphemism can become facetiously epidemic. For example, when treating the word "engineer," Mencken said:

Since *engineer* became a title of prestige in America, it has been assumed by a wide spectrum of charlatans. For a number of years the *Engineering News-Record*, the organ of the legitimate engineers, used to devote a column every week to uninvited invaders of the craft, some so fantastic that it was constrained to reproduce their business cards photographically to convince its readers that it was not spoofing. A favorite exhibit was a bedding manufacturer who first became a *mattress engineer* and then promoted himself to the lofty dignity of *sleep engineer*. No doubt he would have called himself a *morphician* if he had thought of it. A tractor driver advertised for a job as a *caterpillar engineer*. A beautician burst out as an *appearance engineer*. Elsewhere appeared display engineers who had been lowly window dressers until some visionary among them made the great leap, *demolition engineers* who were once content to be house wreckers, and *sanitary engineers* who had an

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earlier incarnation as garbage men. The *wedding engineer* is a technician employed by florists to dress churches for hymenal orgies. The *commencement engineer* arranges college and high-school commencements; he has lists of clergymen who may be trusted to pray briefly, and some sort of fire-alarm connection with popular commencement orators. The *packing engineer* crates clocks, radios, and chinaware for shipment. The *correspondence engineer* writes selling letters guaranteed to pull. The *income engineer* is an insurance solicitor in a new false face. The *dwelling engineer* replaces lost keys, repairs leaky roofs and plugs up rat holes in the cellar. The *vision engineer* supplies spectacles at cut rates. The *dehorning engineer* attends to bulls who grow too frisky. Perhaps, the prize should go to the *dansant engineer* (an agent supplying dancers and musicians to night clubs), or to the *hot-dog engineer*.

Other examples of intended thoughts being sacrificed via euphemism are:

INTENDED THOUGHTS

night watchman
 clerk-typist
 janitor
 doorman
 cow-barn
 ineffective politician
 casket
 shroud
 bureaucrat
 sponge
 insane
 huckster
 robber baron
 inflation
 pornography
 gang
 tossed
 child abuse
 abortion
 sickly
 infatuation or lust
 apathetic
 Damn!

EUPHEMISMS

surveillance expert
 executive assistant
 sanitary officer
 traffic coordinator
 milking parlor
 struggling statesman
 slumber cot
 slumber shirt
 public servant
 problem drinker
 mentally impaired
 public relations expert
 leading industrialist
 vigorous activity in pricing
 escape literature
 clique
 out asked to resign
 guardian discipline
 improving the situation
 delicate
 love
 neutral
 Oh, Dear!

Audiences expect honest messages. Orators who are polite and complimentary may be noble in intent, but such noble spirit should not occur at the expense of truth, honesty, and comprehension. Effective oratory demands clarity, and euphemisms often hamper the latter. In short, orators should not employ them!

DON'T USE SLANG !

Slang is language comprising certain widely current terms having a forced or grotesque meaning. Orators who use slang run the risk of causing three major problems.

Orators can offend their audience because slang often is characterized by vulgar and socially unacceptable words and idiomatic expressions. Typical of this group are words that deal with human anatomy, bodily functions, and sexual behavior.

Orators can bore their audience because slang quickly becomes worn and impoverished. Boring expressions include "*That's cool*"; "*Far out*"; "*It's hotter than hell*"; "*Clear as crystal*"; "*I can dig it*"; and "*That's gross*."

Perhaps the most damaging result of slang is that it can confuse the audience and thus prevent the transmission of intended thoughts. For instance, a former convict addressed a group of Kiwanians at their weekly luncheon. The speaker employed such terms as bandog (police officer in uniform), bice (prison sentence of two years), bale of hay (blonde-haired woman), blue tab (trusty), sculpting (lying on a marble slab in the morgue), trotter (person evading the police), and *viper* and *windjammer* (informer).

After the speech, one of the Kiwanians stood up and said, "*Your experience in prison seems quite interesting, but please tell us the meaning of the following words.*" The Kiwanian proceeded to name all of the above slang. The latter was proper within the walls of prison, but it was not customary language for the Kiwanian audience. The speaker had been ineffective.

Some examples of slang that appeared in college and university orations and failed to communicate clarity of message are *freak* (one who rides motorcycles), *fratorities* (bisexual students), *shuck* (hypocrite), *ups* (amphetamines), *downs* (barbiturates), *smack* (heroin), *schoolboy* (codeine), *thigh-scraper* (miniskirt), *sweat-box* (crowded party), *happy shop* (liquorstore), and *Mexicancellation* (Mexican divorce).

Perhaps the most confusing slang is that which people transfer from their stay in foreign countries. What may be common knowledge to people traveling abroad may not be understood by their audiences back home. For example, how many Americans, especially if they have never visited England, or studied its culture, would know the meaning of the following slang?

SLANG

abroaded
 all-night man
 ankle-biters
 apple-cart
 barrel-fever
 cross-boy
 dando
 the devil's bedstead
 Dinah
 England's umbrella
 ensign-bearer
 fake a poke
 father's brother
 fire-escape
 fly a tile
 gas-bag
 go due north
 grinding-house
 handle
 Isle of Flip
 Isle of Matriculation
 jumper
 muttons
 muzzy
 penny pick
 play up
 rasher of wind
 sizzler
 snogging
 spurge

MEANING

sent to prison
 body snatcher
 trousers
 the human body
 disease from heavy drinking
 crook or dishonest fellow
 heavy eater who cheats restaurants
 thirteenth card of a suit
 favorite girl or woman
 Ireland
 drunken man
 pick a pocket
 pawnbroker
 clergyman
 knock off a man's hat
 person of too many words
 go bankrupt
 house of correction
 nose
 eggs and sherry at Oxford Univ.
 entrance into Oxford University
 sweater
 tax on livestock
 overcast
 cigar
 do one's best
 very thin person
 very fast racehorse
 courting a girl
 effeminate male

Orators who decide to employ slang should ask themselves: "Is my use of slang the only way by which I can convey my intended message?" If the answer is affirmative, then they should use the slang; words are made for thought, not thought for words. However, if the use of slang is not necessary, then orators should dismiss it from their vocabulary!

DON'T USE SHOPTALK !

People in many professions and activities employ *shoptalk*, a system of language signals which generally are incomprehensible to anyone unaffiliated with the particular profession or activity. At times shoptalk and slang are synonymous. For example, the language of convicts can be both slang and shoptalk (e.g., *trotter*, *bale of hay*, *ups*, *downs*, and *sculpting*).

An example of shoptalk that is not slang comes from an address of a speech correctionist. While speaking before her professional colleagues at a national convention, the correctionist referred to the *buccinator*, *genio-hyoid muscle*, *crico-thyroid muscle*, *inferior constrictor*, and *levator palatini*. The correctionist also referred to consonants that are *plosive*, *nasal*, *lateral fricative*, *rolled*, and *flapped*: and vowels that are *open*, *half-open*, *half-closed*, and *closed*. Of course, her immediate audience had been formally trained in speech correction and thus understood her vocabulary. However, persons not trained in the discipline most likely would not have understood her.

Another example of shoptalk occurred during a Calculus seminar. Those not familiar with Calculus most likely would not have understood the professor's following terms: *Stoke's Theorem*, *The Divergence Theorem*, *Green's Theorem*, *Triple Integrals*, *Double Integrals in Polar Coordinates*, *Second Partial Test*, and *Absolute and Conditional Convergence: Alternating Series*.

People unfamiliar with world philosophy most likely would not know the theses of the following works, but the theses would be shoptalk for trained philosophers.

<u>AUTHOR</u>	<u>TREATISE</u>
Plato	<u>Euthyphro</u>
Aristotle	<u>Ethica Nicomache</u>
Mencius	<u>Meng Tsu</u>
Lucretius	<u>De Rerum Natura</u>
Sextus Empiricus	<u>Outlines of Pyrrhonism</u>
Saint Thomas Aquinas	<u>Summa Theologia</u>
Niccolo Machiavelli	<u>The Prince</u>
Francis Bacon	<u>Novum Organum</u>
Blaise Pascal	<u>Pensees</u>
Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz	<u>Theodicy</u>
Jean Jacques Rousseau	<u>The Social Contract</u>
Immanuel Kant	<u>Critique of Pure Reason</u>
Henri Bergson	<u>Creative Revolution</u>
Jean-Paul Sartre	<u>Being and Nothingness</u>
Paul Tillich	<u>The Courage to Be</u>

Many people untrained in human anatomy and orthopaedic surgery would understand the message of a physician who said: "Last evening, while returning home from a movie, John Carpenter slipped on an icy sidewalk and tore some knee-cartilage." The audience would understand (1) that last evening John Carpenter went to a movie; (2) that during his way home he slipped on an icy sidewalk; and (3) that his fall caused some of his knee-cartilage to tear. Communication would be effective. However, the same audience would have much difficulty trying to understand the following shoptalk cited in Keith L. Moore's Clinically Oriented Anatomy to describe John Carpenter's injury.

Meniscus Injury (Knee-Cartilage Injury). Localized tenderness and pain in the flexed knee on the medial side of the patellar ligament, just proximal to the medial tibial plateau, suggests injury to the medial meniscus. Injury to this cartilage is about 20 times more common than injury to the lateral meniscus. *Injury to the medial meniscus* results from a twisting strain that is applied to the knee joint when it is

flexed. Because the medial meniscus is firmly adherent to the tibial collateral ligament, twisting strains of this ligament may tear and/or detach the medial meniscus from the fibrous capsule. Part of the torn cartilage may become displaced toward the center of the joint and become lodged between the tibial and femoral condyles. This "locks the knee" in the flexed position, preventing the patient from fully extending the knee. When weight is borne by the flexed knee joint, a sudden twist of the knee may also rupture the medial meniscus, usually splitting it longitudinally. This injury is common in athletes who twist their flexed knee while running (e.g., in football and basketball). It also occurs in coal miners and other persons who can topple over when they are working in a crouched or squatting position. Because the internal edges of the menisci are poorly supplied with blood, tears in them heal poorly. Tears near the peripheral, which are vascularized by genicular branches of the popliteal artery, usually heal well. The menisci can be observed during arthroscopy and when air and/or dense contrast material is injected into the synovial cavity of the knee joint before radiographs are taken. *Pneumarthograms* or double contrast arthrograms are helpful in demonstrating soft tissue lesions of the knee joint. Because air is less opaque than the menisci, it appears black in the radiograph and outlines the soft tissues (e.g., the menisci). When dense contrast materials are used, the articular cartilages and menisci appear as radiolucent images within the dense contrast medium. Good images of the ligaments and menisci of the knee are also produced by magnetic resonance imaging.

Misunderstanding a speaker's message is not the only problem that can result from shoptalk unfamiliar to the audience. Even physical assault is possible! This disadvantage is rare and even humorous at times, but it must be a horrible experience for the speaker. For instance, one day a physician was examining a woman for possible *mitral stenosis*, a condition characterized by a distinct rumbling murmur near the heart's apex, and by a certain vibration felt by the examining finger on the patient's chest. In medical shoptalk this vibration is called a *thrill*.

When the patient was lying on the examination table, the physician placed aside his stethoscope and proceeded to search for the peculiar vibration. To concentrate better, the physician closed his eyes while examining the patient's breast. Unable to find any vibrations, the physician withdrew his hand from the patient's breast, turned to his nurse, smiled, and said, "No thrill." Immediately the patient sat up, pushed the physician aside, and furiously informed him that she had not come to his office to give him a thrill. Obviously communication broke down because of shoptalk.

In short, orators should be reluctant to employ shoptalk, for the latter certainly can hamper communication effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

If clarity of message is a priority, orators would be wise not to employ euphemism, slang, or shoptalk. If they feel such language is the only way to share their ideas, then they should do so discreetly, namely with judicious reserve.

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