

SOME DO NOT'S FOR ORATORICAL CLARITY

by
Wayne C. Mannebach

Part Three:

Abusing the Nature of Dictionary Definition and Mistaking Similarity for Sameness and Words for Reality

LEARN WHAT NOT TO DO !

As stated in Part One of this series of articles treating oratorical clarity (See *Rostrum*, Vol. 76, No.7, March 2000, pp. 42-43, 46-47), 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 two, 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 us-

....By taking sufficient time to select words which best represent one's intended thoughts, students of oratory should become clearer and, thus more effective persuaders.

age. The author assumes from his teaching and coaching experience that, if the orator knows **what should not be done**, he or she will employ **what should be done**.

DON'T ABUSE THE NATURE OF DICTIONARY DEFINITION!

Dictionaries can be very useful, but orators must realize that dictionary definitions are *guides*, not *absolutes*, to good usage. *Good* definitions are neither true nor false, but always intelligible and useful.

Dictionary definitions have no finality, for the editors of a dictionary do not establish what words should mean, but reveal how words are in fact used colloquially, as slang, as shoptalk, and by educated people of the language. In other words, dictionaries are historical records, not dicta; they report and describe, but they don't dictate!

Students of oratory must be careful not to mistake definitions for propositions of fact. Definitions are statements designed to give information about the meaning of a word. They express the association of a word with its meaning, but they do not claim to be true or false. On the other hand, propositions of fact are statements designed to assert a relation between two meanings. Propositions of fact

are capable of being true or false. For example, a proposition of fact is: "The Empire State Building is taller than the Lincoln Memorial." A definition is: "A square is a rectangle with four equal sides."

Another way to illustrate the difference between propositions of fact and definitions is to focus on reversibility. In other words, the Empire State Building is taller than the Lincoln Memorial, but the Lincoln Memorial is not taller than the Empire State Building; whereas a square is a rectangle with four equal sides, and a rectangle with four equal sides is a square. Definitions are reversible with similar meaning; propositions of fact cannot reverse and maintain similar meaning.

To test the quality of a proposition of fact, the orator should determine if the proposition is intelligible and either true or false. A definition is similar to a proposition of fact in that it also must be intelligible, but it is unlike the proposition of fact in that it should be tested not for truth or falsity, but for usefulness.

An orator should never ask if a definition is true or false, because a definition is merely the explicit resolution to use words in a certain manner. Hence, if a speaker were to say, "A square is a rectangle with four equal sides," he or she and the audience are to understand each other as saying, "From now on, we shall use the word "square" to mean "a rectangle with four equal sides." There is no truth or falsity here; it is only a linguistic convention, a social contract or agreement between orator and audience. It is, in all respects, like the command: "Go outside and rake the leaves!"; the command is intelligible and useful, but it is incapable of being true or false.

Suppose an orator defined *baseball* as "a carbolic desquamation of the petula schematibus." Such a statement most likely would not be meaningful to the audience and, therefore, it would not be a good definition. On the other hand, meaning likely would occur, if the orator defined *baseball* as "any typed-written letter on orange paper"; the words would be meaningful enough. However, the definition still would be poor because of the second test of a good definition, namely "Is the definition useful?" Because the word *baseball* traditionally is not defined as "any typed-written letter on orange paper," the definition would not be useful for social or conventional usage. Therefore, the definition would not promote communication effectiveness.

Some people would contend that the above defini-

O
r
a
t
o
r
y

tion of *baseball* is not *true*. The definition is peculiar, because in the English language *baseball* customarily does not mean "any typed-written letter on orange paper." However, to say that a definition is uncustomary or peculiar is not to say that it is false or untrue. Therefore, when people call a definition true or false, what they probably mean is that the definition is useless, uncustomary, or useless because of being uncustomary.

In brief, students of oratory must appreciate that dictionary definitions are only guides to good usage; they never dictate absolute definitions. A *good* definition is neither true nor false, but always it is *intelligible* and *useful*. Definitions are not propositions to be proved. Statements about definitions can be proved, but not the definitions themselves.

DON'T MISTAKE SIMILARITY FOR SAMENESS!

A major advantage that most humans have over animals is the ability to abstract and then adapt to many varied situations. Daily life for most humans demands that they observe conditions in their environment, compare the conditions with past experiences, label the conditions as similarities or dissimilarities, and react toward the new conditions favorably or unfavorably. A major problem, however, is that many people fail to comprehend that *similar* is not *identical*; that similarities occur only because dissimilarities are excluded.

Similarity occurs when two or more phenomena employ likeness or resemblance in a general way. Sameness occurs when two or more phenomena which fail to share any difference in kind, degree, or quality.

Some people confuse sameness with similarity by failing to take into account differences which exist among members of a given class. They point out only similar properties, and from these similarities they employ the words *same* or *identical*. Results, for instance, are such blatant remarks as "Teenagers who live in slums carry concealed weapons"; "Russians are Communists and anti-capitalists"; "Politicians are corrupt"; "Medical doctors are concerned primarily with making *money*"; "Defendants who plead the Fifth Amendment really have something to hide"; "Orientals look alike"; "People on welfare are lazy"; "People who get tatoos and body-piercings are decadent-minded"; "College and universities are breeding grounds for professional *sports*"; and "Musicians are junkies."

Surely such absolute evaluations are fallacies, for they fail to treat how various members of each class differ from other members of the class. Students of oratory would be wise to keep in mind Walter T. Marvin's description of the uniqueness of each existing thing. Cited in Austin Phelps' English Style in Public Discourse (64-65), Marvin said, for illustration:

What could seem more nearly alike than the pebbles strewn along the seashore, but do we ever find two really the same? On the maple the leaves all look sufficiently alike to be recognized at once as maple leaves, yet how easy it is to pick any two and notice a difference between them. In some families the common type of feature is so marked that we can recognize even strangers as members. Yet seen together we easily can distinguish even the very closely resembling twins.

From cases of this near similarity of features we turn our attention to that of faces in a great crowd. All are distinctly human, but there seem to be never two alike.

So we could go on recalling the wonderful variety throughout every type or sort of object in the whole realm of nature.

Is there any end to it as far as we can judge or as far as the facts of nature lead us to believe? We have to answer No, and thus regard the world as composed of objects admitting of an indefinite variety. Not only do these objects themselves differ, but their motions seem likewise to differ whenever we are able to observe them carefully. Who ever threw a stone through absolutely the same path in the air, landing upon the identical spot of ground as did the stone that he threw before? In short, who of us ever repeated an act with absolute accuracy? Careful measurement or observation would be sure to show parts of the act a little different in the one case from like parts in the other.

We may try to play a piece of music twice over, but every time we do so, and are keenly observant, we are sensitive of differences. And what is true in such complicated activities as our own seems equally true, for the best of reasons, of the simple activities in the material world about us.

What day is the exact repetition of some previous day in atmosphere and temperature? What river flows two successive days in exactly the same channel? We hear over and over again of human nature being ever the same and of history repeating itself; but we do not mean this except in a rough way. No two instances of human conduct, no two stages in the world's history, or in a nations, are mere repetitions. A new element, and a very large element, is sure to be found, if our observations and information be but fairly accurate and complete.

Thus, we find no matter where we look, and we believe we could find even where our senses fail at present to reveal it, an indefinite variety of actions or changes taking place in or through these objects.

In brief, when arguing from examples, or from analogies in the form of simile, metaphor, parable, fable, or allegory, orators should bear in mind that such evidence or arguments enjoy only *general resemblances* and, therefore, are *similarities*, not same or identical phenomena. Differentiating between sameness and similarity can generate an image of being unbiased, accurate, and of good will, all traits that enhance oratorical effectiveness.

DON'T MISTAKE WORDS FOR REALITY !

Students of oratory must realize that people live in a verbal world as well as in a non-verbal one, and that many people fail to appreciate that words are not the reality they represent. The word or symbol is not inherently connected with the thing symbolized. For instance, when people are hungry, they do not eat the *word* bread; they eat the bread itself. When people are thirsty, they do not drink the *word* water; they drink the water itself.

Because language does not precisely correspond to what it

is designed to *represent*, Alfred Korzybski, a pioneer in general semantics, argued in Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics, that at best language can be considered as maps, and maps can misrepresent their territory. For illustration, a university professor held in his hand a dirty glass and asked how many of his students would drink from it. None volunteered. Then the professor held up another glass wrapped in paper with the words "This glass has been sterilized for your protection and convenience." The professor then asked how many of his students would drink from it, and most replied affirmatively. The professor smiled, unwrapped the paper, and revealed a glass filthier than the first glass. The *words* on the wrapper did not accurately represent the glass itself. The *map* was not the territory

In Language in Thought and Action S. I. Hayakawa, another general semanticist, observed that many people commit follies, destroy truth, and create chaos because they fail to observe that the symbol is not the thing symbolized; that the word is not the thing; that the verbal world is not the real world.

Yukio Mishima, one of Japan's most prolific modern authors, also was sensitive to the difference between the real world and the verbal world. For example, in Sun and Steel, he stated that "words are a medium that reduces reality to abstraction for transmission to our reason," and that words "have the power to corrode reality."

Even Shakespeare, perhaps the world's greatest playwright, was sensitive to the misrepresentation that words often generate. For example, in Romeo and Juliet (II,ii), Juliet says:

"Tis but thy name that is my enemy;
Thou art thyself though, not a Montague.
What's Montague? It is not hand, nor foot, Nor arm,
nor face, nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O! be some other name: What is in
a name? that which we call a rose By any other name
would smell as sweet;
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd, Retain
that dear perfection which he owes Without that title.
Romeo, doff thy name;
And for that name, which is no part of thee, Take all
myself."

Because language misrepresents one's actual experiences, and thus fails to represent one's intended thoughts, students of oratory should ask themselves the following two questions when preparing their addresses: "What do I precisely want to say?" and "Are my selected words the best words I can use to express clearly my intended thoughts?" By appreciating that language is a *verbal world*, not the *real world*, and by taking sufficient time to select words which best represent one's intended thoughts, students of oratory should become clearer and, thus, more effective persuaders.

CONCLUSION

Orators should adhere to Quintilian who said in his De institutione oratoria, "Care should be taken, not that the reader [and hearer] may understand, but that he must understand."

(Dr. Wayne Mannebach directed debate and forensics at Ripon College for nine years, and for the past twenty-five years he has taught English at St. Mary Central High School in Neenah (WI).