

# SOME DO NOT'S FOR ORATORICAL CLARITY

by  
Wayne C. Mannebach

## Part Two: Equivocation, Superficial Resemblance, and Faulty Syntax

### LEARN WHAT NOT TO DO!

As mentioned previously in "Some Do *Not's* for Oratorical Clarity -Part One: Verbosity, Over-Conciseness, and Profundity" (*Rostrum* 7 (March 2002, 42-43,46-47), perhaps the most practical way to improve oratorical effectiveness is to focus on those features which compete with clarity. In other words, by knowing **what not to do**, the orator can focus on what **should be done**. This article stresses equivocation, superficial resemblance, and faulty syntax.

**..... "Numerous reasons account for oratorical ineffectiveness, and equivocation, superficial resemblance, and faulty syntax are among the most notorious."**

### DON'T EQUIVOCATE!

Shortly before being killed in combat, Shakespeare's Macbeth said to Macduff: "And be these juggling fiends no more believed That palter with us in a double sense; That keep the word of promise to our ear, And break it to our hope." (*Macbeth* VII, viii. ). Macbeth was talking about one of the major reasons why some orators are unsuccessful, namely that they *equivocate*; they assign intentionally or unintentionally two or more meanings to a particular word. The audience then becomes confused because of the unknown change in meaning.

For instance, a college orator argued that "the United World Federalists have many prominent members. Some of their past members are Washington, Adams, and Hamilton. In the names of these great fathers of our country, I urge you to support the United World Federalists!" In the first sentence, the word *Federalists* refers to a federation of various *countries*. In the second sentence, the orator implied the word *Federalists*. However, the meaning of the implied word does not apply to a federation of countries, but to a federation of *American States*. The orator equivocated.

A university debater opposed to miners' demands for more money and fewer working hours argued: "It is ridiculous

for miners to want more money for only 32 hours of weekly labor. Why, whenever a cave-in occurs, they willingly work for 48 straight hours to free their entombed buddies." The debater assumed that the miners should work long hours *all of the time* because they work long hours *some of the time*. In the first sentence, *work* refers to labor for private financial gain, whereas in the second sentence, *work* refers to labor voluntarily conducted to save human life. The debater equivocated.

A high school debater argued that "the United States demands that nations should reduce their nuclear stockpiles. All right! The United States is a nation, so the United States, too, should reduce its stockpiles." In the first sentence, *the United States* refers to the President and certain advisors, whereas in the second sentence, *the United States* refers to the fifty States. Also, in the first sentence, *nations* refers to nations considered *jointly* or *collectively*, whereas in the second sentence, *nation* refers to an *individual* nation. The debater equivocated.

Sometimes equivocation occurs because of the *sound* of the word. Consider, for example, the American professor who had been invited to lecture at a Japanese university. Visiting the campus before his scheduled time to speak, the professor was impressed by the size and unity of the school. In the introduction to his lecture, the professor intended to express admiration for the university by saying, "What a *whole* is your university!" Some "anti-establishment" students immediately applauded, for they thought the university was a *hole* and liked the way the professor agreed with them. The professor didn't agree; he hadn't agreed. Obviously equivocation broke down communication.

Reporting on her recent tour of England, a college student described her presence at a speech delivered by the Prime Minister in the House of Commons. She said: "On the floor stood the Prime Minister; behind him sat members of the Cabinet; in front of him sat members of the opposition; and in *tiers* around him sat the other House members." "In *tears*?" asked a classmate of the speaker. "Yes, in *tiers*," replied the speaker. Had the speaker, during the preparation of her speech, realized the possible confusion resulting from the pronunciation or sound of the word *tiers*, she might have said, "By *tiers* I mean *TIERS*, not *TEARS*." The speaker failed to recognize the possibility of equivocation and, thus, communication broke down.

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The word *speech* was troublesome for most students in a university General Semantics seminar. Their instructor told them to find any fault in the following passage: "The Provencal speech became a highly developed literary language. Cicero's *First Cataline* is a model political speech. The actor Garrick learned the brilliant new twenty-line speech in five minutes between acts. Speech Correction is a richly rewarding career for anyone interested in speech development."

Most students failed to recognize the equivocation of *speech*. In the first sentence, *speech* means *dialect*. In the second sentence, *speech* means *oration*. In the third sentence, *speech* means *a part of an actor's spoken role*. In the last sentence, the first *speech* means the *rehabilitation or correction of abnormal oral utterance*, and the second *speech* means *oral utterance*.

Another way to appreciate the possibility that words change in meaning is to examine a dictionary. For instance, a brief glance at a dictionary reveals that the word *bag* can stand for a purse, a suitcase, a sack for carrying groceries, a cow's udder, a baseball base, the amount of game killed, a swelling or bulging in sails, an unattractive female, a career, taking the entire blame for a misdeed ("He was left holding the bag."), and being first to take the initiative ("He bagged it.").

Another word that clearly reveals high probability for equivocation is *break*. For illustration, *break* means:

1. To smash ("The bottle *broke* into many pieces.")
2. To infringe ("Jacob has *broken* the law.")
3. To dissolve ("China's government *broke off* friendly relations with university students.")
4. To fracture ("The star receiver *broke* his leg while catching a pass for the winning touchdown.")
5. To interrupt regularity ("The sirens *broke* the evening's usual silence.")
6. To put an end to ("The homerun *broke* the tie.")
7. To discover a system ("Central Intelligence *broke* the enemy's code.")
8. To remove a part from a collection ("What? You want me to *break up* a set of seven pieces to sell you this single piece? No, thank you!")
9. To exchange for ("I *broke* a twenty-dollar bill to get four five-dollar ones.")
10. To penetrate ("The stone skipped three times, *breaking* the water's stillness.")
11. To escape from captivity ("The reporter discovered that at midnight three men will attempt to *break out* of Lawson Prison.")
12. To better a score ("In her last attempt she *broke* the record for the long jump.")
13. To disclose through speech ("At dinner Charles *broke* the news of our vacation to Hawaii.")
14. To solve ("Scotland Yard *broke* the terrorist's case in two days.")
15. To rupture ("I *broke* a blood vessel playing football.")
16. To ruin financially ("Last evening a professional gambler *broke* the Sands Casino.")
17. To wear down one's spirit ("Some Inquisitionists used torture to *break* their prisoners.")
18. To impair or weaken power ("Hashimoto used his arm to *break* the vicious karate blow aimed at his head.")
19. To train to obedience ("I plan to *break* the stallion by

next Tuesday.")

20. To release a story for publication ("Our editor will *break* the story in tomorrow's newspaper.")
21. To scatter balls ("In billiards I like to *break*.")
22. To throw a curve ("The opposing pitcher struck out Joe by *breaking* the ball to the left.")
23. To win over an opponent's serve ("Sue won the tennis tournament mainly because she *broke* her opponent's serves.")
24. To unfurl a flag ("The Captain *broke* colors at 6:00 a.m.")
25. To prove the falsity of something ("The police *broke* his alibi by proving that he was not home when the crime occurred.")
26. To initiate a plan or campaign ("Yesterday, church administrators *broke* ground for the new school.")
27. To begin suddenly ("Yesterday, war *broke* out in the Middle East.")
28. To dash for some place ("After evading three tacklers, the halfback *broke* for the goal-line.")
29. To appear suddenly ("After swimming in the lake, she *broke* out in a severe rash.")
30. To be overwhelmed with sorrow ("Queen Dido felt her heart *break* when Aeneas said he no longer loved her.")

Of course, the above examples fail to reveal all of the meanings of the word *break*, but they are reason to support v. Welby's contention in What Is Meaning that "there is, strictly speaking, no such thing as the sense of a word, but only the sense in which it is used." In other words, orators and other public speakers should not assume that a word has only one meaning, and that the same meaning will be generated each time the word appears. Equivocation is a powerful obstacle to effective communication.

### DON'T EMPLOY SUPERFICIAL RESEMBLANCES!

Montaigne (Essays II, xxxvii) said that "easily doth the world deceive itself in things it desireth or fain would have come to pass." The English language contains numerous words that have *nearly*, but not *exactly*, the same denotation. For instance, the following words on the left were used by students in debate and forensic activities in Japan and the United States, and the words on the right are what the students should have used according to their *intended* thoughts.

ACCEPT (to receive, believe, or take what is offered)	EXCEPT (to exclude; other than)
ADAPT (to adjust or change to fit)	ADOPT (to select and treat as one's own)
ADDICTED TO (a bad habit)	SUBJECT TO (an influence)
ADVICE (recommendation)	ADVISE (to recommend)
AFFECT (to influence)	EFFECT (to bring about)
AGGRAVATE (to make worse)	ANNOY (to irritate)
ALLUDE (to refer to directly)	ELUDE (to irritate)
ALLUSION (indirect reference)	ILLUSION (deceptive appearance)
AMEND (to alter)	EMEND (to correct)
AMONG (refers to more than two in a group)	BETWEEN (refers to only two individuals)
AMORAL (means neither morally right nor morally wrong)	IMMORAL (means morally wrong; in conflict with traditional values)
AMOUNT (for bulk measurement)	NUMBER (for counting separate units)
BESIDE (near to; nearby)	BESIDES (other than; in addition to)
BORROW (to receive a loan)	LEND (to extend a loan)
CAN (shows ability)	MAY (shows possibility)
CENSOR (to ban)	CENSURE (to reprimand)
CHARACTER (one's real nature)	REPUTATION (one's socially given image)
CLIMACTIC (climax; high point)	CLIMATIC (climate; weather status)
COMPLEMENT (to complete)	COMPLIMENT (to offer praise)
DEPRECATE (protest against)	DEPREDATE (plunder or pillage)

DISINTERESTED (unbiased)	UNINTERESTED (apathetic)
ELICIT (to bring out)	ILLCIT (unlawful)
EMINENT (famous; prominent)	IMMINENT (ready to occur)
ETHOS (an individual's character)	ETHICS (a system or theory of morality)
EXCEPTIONAL (very different)	EXCEPTIONABLE (objectionable)
FARTHER (refers to distance)	FURTHER (refers to degree)
GENIUS (exceptional intellect)	GENUS (class or kind)
GUILE (insidious cunning)	GUILT (remorse)
HUMAN (belonging to mankind)	HUMANE (having compassion)
IGNORANT (uninformed)	STUPID (lacking ordinary intelligence)
IMPLY (to express indirectly)	INFER (to conclude from facts)
INEXHAUSTIBLE (tireless)	INDESTRUCTIBLE (cannot be destroyed)
LATER (after a period of time)	LATTER (the last thing mentioned)
LAY (to put down)	LIE (to recline)
LEARN (to receive instruction)	TEACH (to give instruction)
LEAVE (to abandon)	LET (to permit)
MAD (insane)	ANGER (ill feelings toward someone)
PHYSICAL (refers to material things)	FISCAL (refers to financial matters)
QUITE (completely)	QUIET (stillness)

In short, orators who employ superficial resemblances are analogous with Mrs. Malaprop in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's play, The Rivals. The following passage (I, ii) typifies Mrs. Malaprop's use of language. The words in parentheses are what she meant to utilize. Indeed, communication was not effective.

Observe me, Sir Anthony. I would by no means wish a daughter of mine to be a progeny (prodigy) of learning; I don't think so much learning becomes a woman; for instance, I would never let her meddle with Greek or Hebrew or algebra (geometry) or fluxions (functions) or paradoxes (parabolas) or such inflammatory branches of learning—neither would it be necessary for her to handle any of your mathematical, astronomical, diabolical (dialectical) instruments. But, Sir Anthony, I would send her, at nine years old, to a boarding school, in order to let her learn a little ingenuity (ingenuousness) and artifice (artistry). Then, Sir, she should have a supercilious (superficial) knowledge in accounts; and as she grew up, I would have her instructed in geometry (geography), that she might have something of the contagious (contiguous) countries; but above all, Sir Anthony, she should be mistress of orthodoxy ( orthography) that she might not misspell and mispronounce so shamefully as girls usually do.

## DON'T VIOLATE SYNTAX!

*Syntax* is the manner in which words are assembled to convey thought. When the words say what the speaker intends, then the syntax has *integrity*. Much communication breaks down because of faulty syntax. For instance, when eulogizing a former parishioner, a clergyman concluded by saying, "Such was the end of our dear friend at the premature age of thirty-Six." The sentence construction does not make sense. How could the parishioner's age be premature? The clergyman should have said "Such was the *premature death* of our dear friend at the age of thirty-six."

A college orator once asked, "o you ever take a walk at night? I very often do and enjoy looking up at the dark sky alone with millions of twinkling stars." The student's syntax shows that the dark sky was alone with millions of twinkling stars. She meant to say, "Do you ever take a walk at night? I very often do by myself and enjoy looking up at the dark sky filled with millions of twinkling stars."

While describing Spring, a high school student stated, "During Spring, people get a new feeling. They clean their household. Clothes begin to appear on the outside line and they ride down the

street with the car windows open." The faulty syntax has the *clothes* going for a ride and the *street* having its car windows open. The student should have said, for instance, "During Spring, people clean their households, hang clothes on the outside lines, and drive cars with the windows open."

In an essay on beauty, a high school student stated, "Beauty can be found walking through a forest listening to the sounds of the animals." It appears that *beauty* was walking through the forest and that the *forest* was listening to the animals' sounds. The student should have said, for instance, "I find beauty when I walk through a forest and attentively listen to the animals'sounds."

Many errors of syntax occurred in a college class on the Anglo-Saxon epic, Beowulf. For instance, one student reported that "while sleeping the demon tore the Danes to pieces." It appears that the *demon* was sleeping while fighting the Danes. The student meant to say, "While the Danes were sleeping, the demon came and tore them apart."

Another student said that "Beowulf became the people's god because he slew the monster without weapons." It appears that the *monster* had no weapons but Beowulf did. The student meant to say, "Without the use of weapons, Beowulf slew the monster." In other words, the student meant that Beowulf bare-handedly killed the monster.

Still, another student said that "Beowulf tells of the people he slaughtered to become a hero among the people." Does the sentence mean that Beowulf became a hero because of the *people he once slaughtered*, or because of his *telling* of the slaughters? The student meant to say, "To become a hero among the people, Beowulf told them about the people he had slaughtered."

The following ad appeared in a high school student newspaper: "For sale, German police-dog; eats anything; very fond of children." It appears that one of the dog's favorite meals was children. The ad should have said, for instance, "For sale, German police dog that likes children and will eat anything the family eats."

A college student in Tokyo reported that "in Tokyo, two infants had fatal falls from the rooftop and from a window of apartment buildings." Did *both* infants fall from the rooftop *and again* from a window of at least two apartment buildings? The student should have said, "In Tokyo, two infants had fatal falls from separate apartment buildings. One infant fell from a rooftop, and the other fell from a window." The last sentence is longer, but much clearer than the original remark.

Lack of syntactical integrity may be amusing, but it prevents clear thought and, thus, hampers effective communication. A grammar book can be a valuable aid during oratorical composition.

## CONCLUSION

Numerous reasons account for oratorical ineffectiveness, and equivocation, superficial resemblance, and faulty syntax are among the most notorious. Orators would be wise to avoid such errors and, instead, adhere to Ludwig Wittgenstein's contention in Traſtatus Logico-Philosophicus, namely that "Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly. Everything that can be said can be said clearly." Clarity of expression can be difficult, but its obtainment is worth all effort.

*(Dr. Wayne C. 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).*