

WORDS: THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF ORATORY AND ALL OTHER COMPETITIVE SPEECH EVENTS

by Charles Ickowicz

. . . *Use of American English should be more than correct; it should reveal a discriminating choice of words. . .*
NFL Oratory Ballot

“put up with” or “tolerate”

“risk” or “jeopardize”

“prove” or “substantiate”

“worried” or “apprehensive”

When speaking which word or phrase would you use? The simpler word or the more sophisticated word?

As contest speaker, this dilemma has probably arisen while you were preparing your speech. Particularly since your vocabulary is being judged and is a factor in winning. In fact, your vocabulary will help you win more than your contests, it will also help you win in life. According to the American Management Association, a strong vocabulary is the single most important factor in management success. But that is a long way off for you to think about. You have a more immediate concern and that is winning the contest.

The English language is one of the richest in the world. It is also the largest. Yet many people, young and old, feel constrained from using the terms that they may want to use because they may feel that they are not simple enough. They may feel self-conscious about using “big words”. But there must be some way to use the English language effectively.

As an orator you may have asked yourself these four questions:

1. Is it better to use simple or more sophisticated words?

2. If you choose to use higher level words, how do you avoid expressions that sound pretentious?

3. Do leaders really speak with a better vocabulary than most people? And if so, what terms do they use?

4. Why is a good vocabulary important?

While conducting research for my book **Word Power: Vocabulary For Success**, I discovered that most successful leaders do use a more sophisticated language. They are considered to be our most effective and articulate communicators. After all they are in positions that require great skill in influencing and guiding others. It is this realization - that leaders speak with enhanced vocabularies - that could be the key to resolving the dilemma of which type of words to use. I believe their level of communication skills should set the standard for all educated individuals. Certainly, in oratory, this level of skill will enable you to state your position very articulately.

1. Is it better to use simple or enriched words? By now most of us have heard that popular sentiment, “KISS - Keep It Simple, Stupid”. But there’s is another line of thinking that also can be called “KISS - Keep It Sophisticated, Smarty”. It agrees that clarity is important but credits the audience with the intelligence to comprehend a more sophisticated vocabulary.

Simple

The “keep it simple” school argues that only basic language should be used to communicate an idea. It almost seems to question the purpose and value of education - at least regarding communication.

But does the “keep it simple” school mean using the simplest word available to communicate a thought? If so, our language skills could very easily deteriorate to a childlike, unsophisticated level. Instead of using precise words, we could recycle simple ones. For example, the term “get” has more than 50 meanings in my thesaurus while the word “thing” has approximately 25 meanings. Here are just a few of the ways these words can be used.

get

Did Theresa *get* (purchase) the new CD player or put the money in the bank for college?

We *got* to (arrived at) the ski slope just in time to start the lesson.

Henry *got* (received) the e-

mail from his brother Jack who is away in college.

Jasmine *got* (obtained) the information for the test from the history teacher.

Did Bob *get* (understand) the math problem?

thing

The teacher wants to discuss two *things* (items) with the class before we start the project.

Three main *things* (issues) caused the French Revolution.

There are three *things* (topics) to discuss in today’s Spanish club meeting.

By using only very simple words, our vocabulary will become imprecise, uninteresting, and very unsophisticated. In fact, according to Dr. Hugh Kenner in an article in *Discover* magazine, “we make over 50% of our normal talk recycling only about 100 words”. According to Dr. Mario Pei, in *The Story of Language*, the average person uses between 1000 and 1200 workable words in his lifetime. With a language of over 600,000 words, English affords us a tremendous richness in communicating that should not be ignored.

Sophisticated

The “keep it sophisticated” school of thought encourages use of a more enriched vocabulary. It views words as tools - tools that need to be mastered in order to be articulate. It suggests that being articulate is a virtue and of value in communicating ideas. If the purpose of education is to elevate our skills and capabilities, then after receiving an education we should grow and change.

At the beginning of this article I listed terms that some might say are too complicated. Review the following sentences out loud and see if the idea is complicated by use of the enhanced words.

My parents seemed *apprehensive* (worried) about my decision to go skiing in Colorado with friends.

You will *jeopardize* (risk) your chance of getting into the college of your choice if you do not take grades seriously enough in

high school.

The teacher would not *tolerate* (put up with) any book reports which were grammatically incorrect.

In preparing for the debate, Gail checked her facts carefully in order to *substantiate* (prove) her position that the downfall of Communism was due to economics.

It is plain to see that these higher-level words are not complicated or confusing, nor do they detract from the idea being expressed. Instead they add richness, nuance and precision. The real danger with these higher level words is not in using them but in over using them. For example, the following statement might be difficult to comprehend because of its over use of the more sophisticated terms.

The debating team would not **tolerate** any **unsubstantiated** claims because they were **apprehensive** that they would **jeopardize** their position.

However the same idea could be communicated more effectively by using fewer higher-level words:

The debating team would not **tolerate** any *unproven* claims because they were *worried* that they would **jeopardize** their position.

For comparison, this is what the statement would sound like without any higher level words:

The debating team would not *put up with* any *unproven* claims because they were *worried* that they would *risk* their position.

An enhanced vocabulary offers us richness and variety in communicating. My favorite analogy is to a painter's palette of colors. If the choice of colors were limited, the artist would not be able to create beautiful paintings. Analogously, if we limit ourselves to simple terms, we would lose the expressiveness, variety and dynamism that come with more highly developed communication skills.

2. If you choose to use higher level words, how do you avoid expressions that sound pretentious?

Let's think back to your English classes. French, you may recall, entered the English language in 1066 when William the Conqueror invaded Britain. For 300 years, French was the official language of England and we now have both French and Anglo-Saxon syn-

onyms for many expressions.

In fact, today's English language has more synonyms than any language in the world. Given the enormous choice of words, how do we know which terms to use? By looking at the speech patterns of articulate leaders, we can draw conclusions regarding which words to use and create a simple system illustrating the least and most desirable terms to use. Let's take a look at word origins since they will provide insight into the speech patterns of leaders:

Level 3

extirpate(L) refractory(L)

cogitate(L) abrogate(L)

Level 2

eradicate(L) obstinate(L)

contemplate(L) terminate(G)

Level 1

get rid of(OE) end(ME)

stubborn(ME) think

(L - Latin, G - Greek, ME - Middle English, OE - Old English)

Level 1 is the level that most of us use in everyday speech, relying on simple words that are commonly Anglo-Saxon. Level 2 are expressions commonly used in the media and by leaders. Many of these expressions are derived from French, Latin and Greek. Level 3 words are unusual terms, non-Anglo-Saxon based, that would only be found in scholarly journals or formal documents and tend to sound pretentious in conversation. They are the least desirable synonyms for oratory or conversation. Leaders avoid them and focus on the enhanced words of Level 2 instead.

3. Do leaders speak with a better vocabulary than most people?

Through my research, I found that leaders do indeed use a more sophisticated vocabulary, not only in formal settings, but also in their casual conversations. I gained three insights from researching hundreds of interviews covering a broad range of topics. My first discovery was that leaders tend to use words derived from Latin, French and Greek rather than simpler Anglo-Saxon based terms. These are the words that leaders are most comfortable with when speaking off the cuff - words that communicate thoughts clearly, dynamically, succinctly. Another discovery was

that leaders do not eliminate simple expressions from their word bank but try to balance simple Anglo-Saxon terms with higher level words. My third discovery was that they use commonly understood words that are not commonly spoken. These terms are more sophisticated, more authoritative and also more precise.

4. Why is a good vocabulary important?

The key reason for having good spoken vocabulary skills is not to *impress* others but to *influence* them - either in a public forum, such as, debate or in private situations. By having a good vocabulary, you are able to express your ideas more articulately. The more articulate you are, the more credible and authoritative you become. By becoming more credible, your ability to influence others increases.

Obviously, when speaking your credibility is critical. What you say is certainly the most important part of the presentation of your position but how you say it is also critical. Consider standing at the podium in an ill-fitting, old suit when at a tournament. Will you feel differently? Do you think that the audience will perceive you differently? If something as basic as clothes will influence your audience, how much more so will the words that clothe your ideas.

Many educated, capable young people have the know-how to achieve success, but may lack the skills to communicate what they know effectively. According to the newly elected Senator from New Jersey, Senator Robert Torricelli, "Communication is the key to progress in our global society, and those who can articulate their thoughts and visions will be the leaders of tomorrow." Words are the building blocks of effective communication. Contest speakers have the opportunity to hone those critical vocabulary skills that will enable them to win in oratory and lead in life.

(Charles Ickowicz is author of Word Power: Vocabulary For Success which is available by calling 1-800-356-9315.)