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.

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

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