

Introduction

Graham Greene liked Fidel Castro. He even liked his four-hour-long speeches. They are ‘not made up of evasions and oratorical tricks and big abstract words’, he wrote in 1966, ‘they are full of information, down to earth, filled with detail . . . he is the revolutionary brain in action, like one of those glass-sided clocks in which you can see the wheels in motion.’ As Greene reported it, the (Spanish) language of the long-winded socialist revolutionary brain was everything the post-capitalist managerial brain is not.

We who are living the lifestyle need not fear socialist revolution or four-hour speeches: our modern leaders do not have enough concrete words at their command for either of them. Not even with PowerPoint. Remember 1984: ‘the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought. In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it.’ In many organisations much of Orwell’s fantasy has all but come to pass. As for the clock: try to think of its wheels in motion while reading this random sample from the base material of managerial language: ‘In particular, the degree of formality evidenced across universities, regarding the documentation of risk strategy and risk appetite, processes to identify and manage risk, and reporting on new and emerging risks suggests that rigour in risk management is a key enabler in improving organisational performance.’ Read it again, and try to think of *anything* in motion.

All public language inclines to pomposity and deceit, but modern public language inclines these ways acutely and nails it to the inclination. Unlike Greene’s Castro, it is also evasive and dishonest in its essence; abstract, devoid of useful information and concrete example, remote from human reality, filled not with detail but with hogwash.

Being spontaneous, and burbling with quotidian life, Greene declared Castro's speeches were nearer to William Cobbett's than Winston Churchill's, 'and the greater for that'. He might have been right in general, but the most famous passage in Churchill's greatest – or historically most telling – speech could not have been plainer or more grounded in the lives of ordinary Britons. 'We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.' We shall fight in the places that we know, right up to our doorsteps.

No mention of a strategy. No action plan and nothing to be actioned. No enablers. No risk management. No accountability. No outcomes to be 'passionate' about. No 'Leadership is about making the right decisions for our country's future.' No 'That's what the government is working to deliver for you.' Compare the verbs with which Churchill tried to save civilisation, with those Tony Abbott chose when trying to save his skin in February 2015.

There is nothing very bad about that risk strategy passage. It is written in the language of the people we now call 'knowledge workers'. By knowledge is meant information or data (including metrics), and ideas about what to do with it. The workers are those whose job it is to make connections, understand processes, implement strategies, find synergies and iterate, iterate, iterate. In developed countries with 'knowledge economies' there are four or five times more knowledge workers than any other category of employee. To extract the last drop of value from them, knowledge and knowledge workers both need management. Business management, of which knowledge management (KM) and human resources (HR) are two

burgeoning subsets, is a colossal knowledge industry in itself. Knowledge workers are the adepts of our time, the toiling masses of the modern century, even if they're just marking time before the robots.

It hardly matters that they do not speak a language that would be familiar to the great majority of English speakers fifty years or a century ago: this is a new world, and this is the English it speaks. Every day around the globe knowledge workers assemble a million paragraphs of the kind I quoted; and their firms exchange immense sums for them. Such paragraphs are the grist of modern commerce; they keep millions employed and able to buy houses and cars and holidays: they make *sovereign consumers* of them, make lifestyles possible. Even when the words are pure muck, we might conclude that the injury to language is a price worth paying for a sprightly economy and a great customer experience.

'The actions of men proceed from their thoughts,' wrote that same William Cobbett. 'In order to obtain the cooperation, the concurrence, the consent of others, we must communicate our thoughts to them. The means of this communication are words . . .'. Management has decided that words such as align, output, input, outcome and buy-in are the best means of communicating thoughts and gaining consent to them. Yet professional translators have told me that the absence of meaning in business documents can make translation impossible: whatever the writers' thoughts are, they cannot be communicated in the words available to them. There are knowledge workers who say that they and the firms they work for are paid to mystify people. Some of their colleagues will argue with that idea. And some will argue that 'mystify' is too generous: that 'render insensible' is nearer to the truth.

The principal point to be made about management language is that the rot has set in. It is to the knowledge economy what 'miner's lung' was to mining, and just as much to be expected.

You cannot suddenly make out of the same person an empowered employee and a sovereign and delighted consumer without consequences for her language. New technology is transforming human communication. As much as we are citizens, we are consumers; as much as we live in a society, we now live in an economy which treats ‘productivity’ much as we used to treat religious observance. Private worlds have been upended; work and careers reconfigured; connections to history, literature, place and belief have been severed. Language must pay a price. The language of management is now inseparable from the lives we all lead and, unless in future human twaddle proves an impediment to artificial intelligence, there will be no stopping its advance.

So where’s the harm? If universities want to pay half a million dollars for risk management, or a rebranding that leaves them with meaningless symbols and mottos – unless it can be said they symbolise the shell of their former meaningful existence – whose business is it but their own? The academics might be embarrassed for a while, but like other living things, they’ll adapt. If every bank, government department, hospital and fire brigade feels that without ‘a mission-driven streamlined process for revising its strategic plan’ it can give up on going forwards, is anyone worse off? Apart from the employees, of course: as far as I know, no one has studied the effects on human beings of long-term daily exposure to jargon and clichés: but we may assume that a world whose language defies visualisation, and is stripped of all lyric, comic and descriptive possibility, is far from an ideal human environment and some kind of trauma may result.

The managerial echo in the empty cadences of politics might be counted as collateral damage. But management speak can scarcely be blamed for the crimes against language committed by politicians who have postured and evaded, and played all sorts of shameless oratorical tricks since the game of politics

began. They have borrowed from wherever their needs took them: from literature and social theory and religion at times long ago, but more recently from marketing and advertising. That's where they learned messaging. They like the military too. How could a politician resist 'operational matters'? It's so lordly and owl-like, when, for all anyone knows, you haven't a clue.

Management's verbless pomposity has not conquered politics, merely found a grateful host: grateful for 'issues', and 'deliver', and 'challenges', and 'step up to the plate', and the 'bottom line', and 'starting a conversation', 'at the end of the day', and, of course, 'going or moving forwards'. More grateful than ever they are these days, because with media of all kinds now pestering them every minute they need new ways to say nothing gravely, or something that conceals something else.

Yet the crime is less in the evasion than in the platitudes that hollow out debate even as they talk about starting a 'conversation' with us. The first true crime of managerial politics is that we must push through so much flatulence and dross to reach the nub of it. Take Governor Nikki Haley of South Carolina the day a young white man killed seven black people worshipping in a church. She began by saying a 'conversation' was needed, that this was the South Carolinian way. She said 'conversation' three times in her first two sentences. The press then asked her if she would now do something about the Confederate flag flying at the state capitol. She replied: 'I think that . . . at a time like this, you have to look back at what we've done. Fifteen years ago the General Assembly at the time they had a *conversation*.' And she said conversation again and again until someone asked her to say what her position was. And she replied: 'You know, right now, to start having policy *conversations* with the people of South Carolina . . .' The 'conversation' has been going on since the Civil War. It takes in

slavery, Jim Crow and the civil rights movement. But ‘conversation’ puts all that history to sleep: it puts the world to sleep and gives Governor Haley time to test the political waters.¹

These suffocating words and phrases might serve communication within a business, but they thwart it in debate. That is the second crime of modern political language: it stifles thinking. For all the talk of diversity and flexibility, brainstorming and blue-skying, management language is designed to get everyone thinking the same way: or, more accurately, not thinking beyond the part each plays in the process. One *cannot* think in clichés, or in pure abstraction, or in messages: and to speak or write in these forms is to prevent others from thinking too. One can’t think or convey thoughts without images. One can’t think in the fog that management jargon deliberately creates. One can’t *know* in it. Whatever else might be better for being process-driven, politics is not. Politics needs thought and language equally. Civil society does.

But where will we find the politicians who know anything else? Leave aside the contaminated areas of their working life if they have had one, the universities they attended have rolled over to the managerial cult. The education departments are infected, and schools write reports that leave parents wondering if the outcomes in outcomes-based education are outcomes for their children or for the educators. Even kindergartens send home folios headed ‘Early Years Learning and Development Framework Outcomes.’

We cannot fail to notice the new technology, the new economy, the new ways of working. It’s hard to miss the fact of the revolution we’re living through. But we can easily miss the way the new language has crept into daily life. We scarcely recognise the change, and even less do we notice what we’re

1 A few days later Governor Haley was brave enough to have the flag and the flagpole removed.

losing. We adapt to the new all-purpose words and forget the many old ones they've replaced. With their passing, meaning fades; poetry and other keys to human possibility, including irony and critical self-reflection, are lost. 'The limits of my language are the limits of my world,' Wittgenstein said. In this sense at least, so-called globalisation and the global revolution in technology and communications have not made for an expanded world, but a diminished one. The knowledge economy is a realm of *lost* knowledge, of assured ignorance.

We come to ignore what has no meaning. We bend our brains around the void, and stop wondering if such as this is an unwitting idiocy or something sinister: 'In the recent evaluation by the Australian Council for Educational Research, school and community members reported that Direct Instruction was having a positive impact on student outcomes, but the researchers were not yet able to say whether or not the initiative has had an impact on student learning.'

Read it five times and you will not find a sensible meaning. Not even if you *drill down*, *deep dive* or *unpack* it. The problem is less one of logic than of language. In your mind's eye try to attach that sentence to some familiar thing, the inside of a ticking clock, for instance. There is no movement: or flesh, or bone or blood. Like many of the entries in this book it is a little absurd: like all but a very few it is also lifeless, and that, as Graham Greene would have said, is the bigger failing and the chief cause of the absurdity.