

On writing

“I mean to say. . .”

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You might regard words as dependable things, that never do anything more tricky than linger overly long on the tip of your tongue. But beware – don't let them gang up on you, or you'll be left with phrases.

George Orwell (1946) wrote in 'Politics and the English language' that:

“prose consists less and less of *words* chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of *phrases* tacked together. . . the ready-made phrases come crowding in. They will construct your sentences for you – even think your thoughts for you, to a certain extent – and at need they will perform the important service of partially concealing your meaning even from yourself.” (pp. 145, 152, italics in original)

Orwell was concerned with the political abuse of language, but psychiatric writing suffers from a similar intrusiveness of the hackneyed. The political use of the term 'community care' is apparent – no one after all would have campaigned for, say, 'patient dispersal'. But the components of the phrase themselves are glib. What is, or who are, the 'community'? – probably the patient's old mum. Does 'care' amount to anything more than simply a monthly depot injection? This is not to reject the value of either the policy or the appropriate use of the phrase as a catch-all for just about anything that happens outside hospital. But couple it with an abstract noun, an overused preposition and some woolly dating, and you get "Developments in community care in recent years . . .", which is vague enough to mean nothing at all.

I imagine "reduction in symptoms" (or, worse, symptomatology) was coined in large drug trials, where scores, as a reflection of symptom state, were reduced; no one really ever knew whether symptoms reduced in number, in severity, or both. Now the phrase slips in whenever anyone gets better, or gets a bit better; specifically how symptoms changed need never impinge. This is bad science through sloppy writing through sloppy – ready-made – thinking. It is odd that "the patient got a bit better" would seem so very out of place in a scientific paper, and yet "a marked reduction in symptoms occurred" is commonplace.

This effect seemingly depends very much on context. When sitting down to write a paper, a whole new vocabulary eases itself in to do the work, and without much ado the writing comes forth, "These cases have a high frequency of such complications". Never would it be said that "I have a high frequency of drinking tea in the morning".

Single words – chosen less and less for the sake of their meaning – besmirch as much as phrases: an indefinite term is given where a specific word or phrase would convey much more. This though would require more work of the writer, in deciding what exactly he or she means. Instead, generalities come to hand as ready as Valium on a repeat prescription. Take as an example, "They have measured changes in glutamate, one of the major excitatory neurotransmitters". 'Major' might mean the most abundant, the most potent, or the most important (preferably in some specific, presumably behavioural, sense). The writer need never know . . . I suspect what was really meant was 'one of the better understood neurotransmitters'.

If you avoid the words jostling at the front of your mind and stop to choose your words to suit your meaning (that is, stop to mean something) you will be more direct. What does "a strongly manipulative effect upon the environment leading to secondary gain" convey more than 'manipulate family and staff'? Also, you may, by choosing your words and meaning, avoid saying something ridiculous – "aetiology can vary on an individual basis" – or meaningless – "This gives a quantitative perspective on thoughts concerning fear in variable intra- and inter-personal situations."

I have concentrated here upon the writer. What if the reader had the same set of words and phrases in place? No one might ever know that nothing had been meant . . . Orwell says "the worst thing one can do with words is to surrender to them."

Reference

ORWELL, G. (1946) Politics and the English language. Currently available in *Inside the Whale and Other Essays*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.