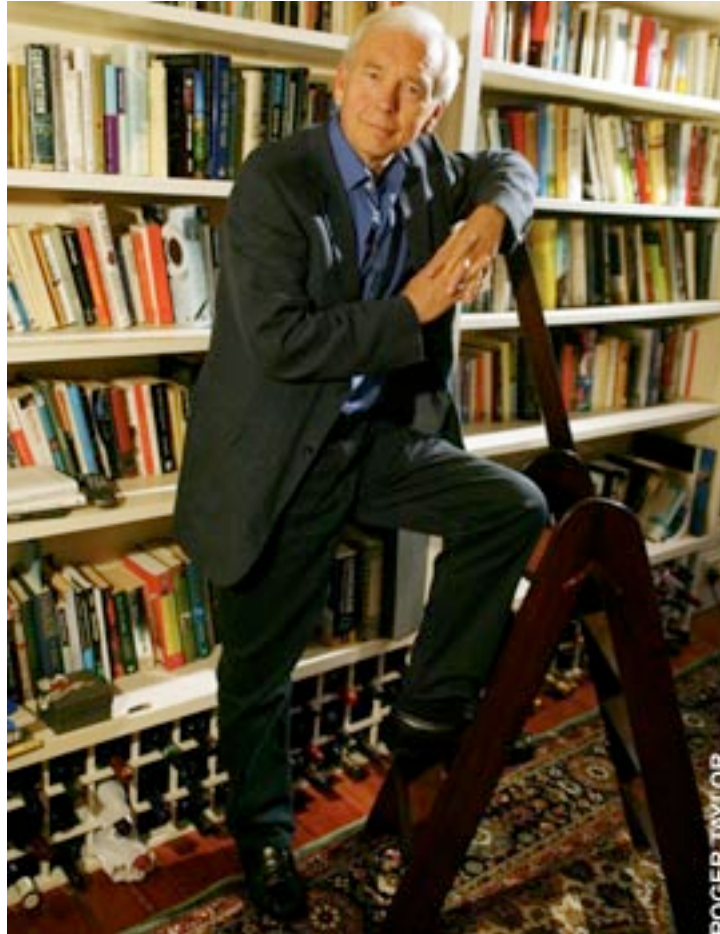


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'Our language continues to be taken over by pseudo-management speak that is itself in danger of becoming meaningless'
—John Humphrys



WE WILL SOON BE LOST FOR WORDS

In this extract from his new book on language, John Humphrys laments the death of formality and the dumbing down of classic texts

If language is a mirror for the society in which we live, no image could be reflected back more sharply than the dominance of

consumerism in our culture. We have become a nation of consumers. We no longer watch television news, we "consume it". The country itself is routinely called "UK plc", as though that's all we are and a British education minister has referred to our universities as "UK Knowledge plc", which needs to keep up its "market share".

I know that universities need to raise money wherever they can, but using language like this has consequences. It's not surprising if students come to see themselves more as customers than as members of their universities. In one sense they are: they have to pay and they want value for money. Why not? But it seems that increasing numbers of them interpret that in the ordinary sense of customers' rights.

Customers are frequently disappointed. When that happens in the world of commerce they complain. And that's exactly what they are doing now in academia. There were five times as many complaints from students in 2005 as there had been in 2004 and many of them, it seems, expressed in language you might use to complain about a rip-off merchant.

Baroness Deech, the first independent adjudicator for Britain's university sector, is not impressed: "In the course of looking at some complaints, we have seen e-mails from students to tutors which astonish me."

Alongside this commercialisation of our language, there has been an erosion of formality. Formality matters. It creates a space between us that allows for a measure of independence and freedom. Take it away and that space is open to all manner of intruders, not all of them commercial.

When, for example, did you last hear a public figure "send their condolences" to someone who'd been bereaved? Not recently, I suspect. Nowadays, if there has been a disaster of some sort, it tends to be: "Our thoughts go out to the loved ones..." Or even: "All our thoughts are with the families of those..."

It may be well meant, but it has the smack of insincerity, for the obvious reason that it's not true. "All" our thoughts do not "go out" to anyone. Of course all of us will feel a degree of sympathy, and it can actually be insensitive to the bereaved. It is the equivalent of that ghastly and much parodied "I feel your pain".

The new enforced intimacy is everywhere. The Queen – widely admired for keeping her distance and exercising iron control over her emotions – is now expected to show she cares. It seems a bit odd. Does anyone really believe she somehow became a different person when she was put under pressure to let us know publicly that she was moved by the death of the Princess of Wales?

Formality is disappearing, too, in how we address each other. The first time I met Tony Blair after the election in 1997 I asked him off-air what I should call him. "Tony, of course," he said. I suppose I knew that's what he would say – we'd known each other for a long time and were obviously on first-name terms – but there's something different about being prime minister. It is, after all, the highest elected rank in the land.

I tried to imagine using Margaret Thatcher's first name when she was at Number 10. I preferred to live.

It's clear that a lot of the public value old-fashioned formality in the way we talk to each other. If I had a pound for every listener who gets het up when politicians use the interviewer's first name I'd be almost as rich as Jonathan Ross. People hate it, so why do politicians do it?

Nor does it gain politicians any advantage when they pepper an interview with "John" or "Jim". If they expect us to react like puppies having our tummies tickled... well, you'd have thought they might have learned by now that it doesn't work like that. We should keep our distance. Formality is one way of doing so.

There can be no more grotesque illustration of the demise of formality on television than the rise of the monstrous confidence trick that goes by the name of "reality television". I do not deny that some of it is hugely entertaining. Indeed, one or two programmes, including Channel 4's *Operatunity*, have been superb.

But most reality television is a lie. It tries to create the illusion that we are watching people behaving naturally in horribly contrived circumstances. I had my own brush with it when I was invited to appear on a new programme for BBC2. The idea was that four "famous" people (how casually we throw around that word) would spend a fortnight at the Chelsea Art College being taught how to draw and paint.

The working title should have alerted me immediately: *Celebrity Art School*. But I loved the idea. Like half of the population, I can

barely draw a bath and I've always wondered if that's because I was never taught properly. I eventually said yes. But I realised from the first hour of the first day what an idiot I'd been.

Although I was fully prepared to persevere, my perseverance was never called for because technique was never called for. The first time I mentioned the word (in about the first hour, as I recall) I was met with an amused tolerance. Poor chap, you could see them thinking, he really is very naive. Sorry, I said, so what is it about?

Whether or not we still have a firm grasp on the meaning of the word art was a question raised recently by the sculptor David Hensel. He made a piece, called One Day Closer to Paradise, of a human head frozen in laughter and balancing precariously on a slate plinth. He submitted it to the Royal Academy for its 2006 exhibition, but somehow the head and the plinth were separated in transit.

Nonetheless, the academy accepted his submission and displayed it. The strange thing was, though, that they thought the plinth was the work of art, not the head, which was nowhere to be seen.

As he put it ruefully: "I've seen the funny side but I've also seen the philosophical side."

At least some good came out of my art school experience. The other "students", including Radio One DJ Nihal, turned out to be great company. At first Nihal and I were slightly wary of each other and then I told him I wondered if an ageing Radio 4 presenter could learn "street". He humoured me and gave me a lesson.

I flatter myself that I have a reasonably good ear for language. I reckoned I could get away with a bit of "Hey, man... how ya doin?" But, no, it doesn't work like that. Street language is inventive and rich. Even a greeting in street is a complex business. "There's a million ways of not saying anything," says Nihal. "Two people could walk up and say: 'What's happenin? Cool, man. What's goin' on with you? Good? All good? Things are running? Peace. Safe'."

Peace means "I'm outa here" (it's a long story) and safe means "We're safe with each other"; there's no animosity. By contrast Nihal told me that if you want to insult someone in street you might call him "chief". No one seems quite sure why. Of course there is a well-known dark side to contemporary street rap. But the point of this intriguing language, according to Nihal, is "to separate me

from you". He told me: "It's like Latin in the church. Knowledge is power." In fact, the moment older people do know is the moment the language dies. "Bling is a classic example," says Nihal. "As soon as you hear commissioning editors at Channel 4 using it it's dead."

Meanwhile, our language continues to be taken over by pseudo-management speak that is itself in danger of becoming meaningless. Take the world of charity, previously known as the voluntary sector. It is now, gradually, changing its name to the Third Sector. Older volunteers are "totally exasperated" not just with the alien language but with what it represents: the transformation of their charity from the kitchen table and the rattling tin to the computer terminal and the huge mailshots. They don't believe it helps them provide a better service.

This language is also entering our schools. Instead of simply teaching, teachers are now being invited to make a "personalised learning offer" to children. It's more than just a dreary piece of business-speak. It implies that a child is a client or a customer, the figure to whom the "offer" is made. The children, in turn, are invited to be "co-investors with the state in their own education".

Come again? I reckon if a child came up to me and said she saw herself as a co-investor with the state in her own education I'd have serious worries about her welfare. I'd start wondering whether management consultants have begun to form sinister sects, grabbing kids in playgrounds and indoctrinating them in business-speak.

And yet when it comes to giving our children a taste of Shakespeare and English at its most beautiful, then suddenly we're all terrified. Might, like turn off the kids... know wha' I mean. Instead they are offered alternative texts, issued by educational publishing houses, that supposedly make our greatest writer more palatable.

Here's a taste. Take a few original lines from Macbeth:

Is this a dagger which I see before me,
the handle toward my hand?

Compare them to the guide version:

Oooh! Would you look at that.

Yes, I know it sounds as if I'm making it up, but you can check it for yourself.


Inevitably the language of politics is changing too. A relatively new phrase in the repertoire is "direction of travel". It's another device for dodging specific detail and talking instead about the "broad picture". I spotted it first when the Government was trying to get its Education Bill through the House of Commons in the face of determined opposition from its own backbenchers.

But it was Guantanamo Bay that provided some of the best examples of how wayward and adrift from reality political language can become. These include a reference by Sandra Hodgkinson, the deputy director of the Office of War Crimes Issues (itself a wonderful linguistic formulation) to "the different care providers" at Guantanamo Bay.

At least some progress with more straightforward language is being made. When the American government realised that the phrase War on Terror was not having the desired effect round the world they came up with a new name. It is now called The Long War. Sometimes the simplest language is the most chilling.

This also brings us right back to why it's important to pay attention to language. Our society, which treats us so much as an audience to be entertained and as consumers to be led to market, often uses language as an anaesthetic.

If verbal blandishments can encourage us to sit back and relax, we can be taken care of in more ways than one. And unless we're trained to be alert to the use of language we're likely to end up duped.

The simple fact is we cannot afford to be careless with our language, because if we are careless with our language then we are careless with our world and sooner or later we will be lost for words to describe what we have allowed to happen to it. 

Beyond Words: How Language Reveals the Way We Live Now by John Humphrys (Hodder & Stoughton)

Les Français ont un mot pour cela (The French have a word for it)

Over the centuries the English language has assimilated phrases and words from other languages.

Here are some examples:

A cappella, Italian, sung without instrumental accompaniment (literally “in chapel style”)

Ad hoc, Latin, made or done for a particular purpose (lit. “to this”)

Agent provocateur, French, a person who tempts a suspected criminal to commit a crime so that they can be caught and convicted (lit. “provocative agent”)

Al dente, Italian, (of food) cooked so as to be still firm when bitten (lit. “to the tooth”)

Alfresco, Italian, in the open air (lit. “in the fresh”)

Bête noire, French, a person or thing one particularly dislikes (lit. “black beast”)

Blitzkrieg, German, an intense, violent military campaign intended to bring about a swift victory (lit. “lightning war”)

Carte blanche, French, complete freedom to act as one wishes (lit. “blank paper”)

Caveat emptor, Latin, the buyer is responsible for checking the quality of goods before purchasing them (lit. “let the buyer beware”)

C’est la guerre, French, used as an expression of resigned acceptance (lit. “that’s war”)

Chacun à son goût, French, everyone to their own taste

Chef-d’oeuvre, French, a masterpiece (lit. “chief work”)

Coup de foudre, French, love at first sight (lit. “stroke of lightning”)

De facto, Latin, in fact, whether by right or not

Déjà vu, French, the sense of having experienced the present situation before (lit. “already seen”)

Dernier cri, French, the very latest fashion (lit. “the last cry”)

Deus ex machina, Latin, an unexpected event that saves an apparently hopeless situation (lit. “god from the machinery”)

Dolce far niente, Italian, pleasant idleness (lit. “sweet doing nothing”)

Doppelgänger, German, an apparition or double of a living person (lit. a “double-goer”)

Double entendre, French, a word or phrase with two possible interpretations (from obsolete French, “double understanding”)

Eminence grise, French, a person who has power or influence without holding an official position (lit. “grey eminence”)

Enfant terrible, French, a person whose behaviour is unconventional or controversial (lit. “terrible child”)

Esprit de corps, French, a feeling of pride and loyalty uniting the members of a group (lit. “spirit of body”)

Fait accompli, French, a thing that has been done or decided and cannot now be altered (lit. “accomplished fact”)

Femme fatale, French, a seductive woman (lit. “disastrous woman”)

Haute couture, French, designing and making of clothes by fashion houses (lit. “high dressmaking”)

In camera, Latin, in private (lit. “in the chamber”)

In loco parentis, Latin, in the place of a parent

Inter alia, Latin, among other things

Jeunesse dorée, French, wealthy, fashionable young people (lit. “gilded youth”)

Katzenjammer, German, a hangover or severe headache accompanying a hangover (lit. “cats’ wailing”)

Laissez-faire, French, a non-interventionist policy (lit. “allow to do”)

Magnum opus, Latin, the most important work of an artist, writer etc (lit. “great work”)

Manqué, French, having failed to become what one might have been (lit. from manquer “to lack”)

Memento mori, Latin, something kept as a reminder that death is inevitable (lit. “remember (that you have) to die”)

Ménage à trois, French, an arrangement in which a married couple and the lover of one of them live together (lit. “way of living”)

Mot juste, French, the most appropriate word or expression

Ne plus ultra, Latin, the best example of something (lit. “not further beyond”)

Non sequitur, Latin, a conclusion or statement that does not logically follow from the previous statement (lit. “it does not follow”)

Nouveau riche, French, people who have recently become rich and who display their wealth ostentatiously (lit. “new rich”)

Papabile, Italian, worthy or eligible to be elected pope

Pied-à-terre, French, a small flat or house kept for occasional use (lit. “foot to earth”)

Prima facie, Latin, accepted as so until proved otherwise (lit. “at first face”)

Quid pro quo, Latin, a favour or advantage given in return for something (lit. “something for something”)

Raison d’être, French, the most important reason for someone or something’s existence (lit. “reason for being”)

Reductio ad absurdam, Latin, a method of disproving a premise by showing that its logical conclusion is absurd (lit. “reduction to

the absurd”)

Sangfroid, French, the ability to stay calm in difficult circumstances (lit. “cold blood”)

Soi-disant, French, self-styled; so-called (lit. “self-saying”)

Sui generis, Latin, unique (lit. “of its own kind”)

Tant mieux, French, so much the better

Tête-à-tête, French, a private conversation (“head to head”)

Vox populi, Latin, public opinion (lit. “the voice of the people”)

Zeitgeist, German, the characteristic spirit or mood of a particular historical period (lit. “time spirit”)

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We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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