

Plain Words, gobbledygook, abstractitis and pollywaffle

TJ Ryan Foundation Research Coordinator Ann Scott writes on signalling roundabouts, conversations in space and Ernest Gowers, her grandfather who championed clear and concise writing, something the TJ Ryan Foundation will strive to maintain.

Just before we left Brisbane to visit family in London, the Brisbane City Council wrote to tell us that a local roundabout was to be 'signalised'. We wondered what this meant: a policeman on traffic duty? better road signs? No, apparently traffic lights are to be installed. Earlier we had heard from Translink that they were 'moving forward'. This seemed redundant. If they were moving backwards we would have been grateful to be warned to avoid our usual bus and ferry trips.

In Canada, at a public management conference we sat through presentations in which speakers did not discuss topics but had a 'conversation' in 'this space'. For those of us with minds tending to wander this conjured up images of escapades in The Tardis; or Apollo 11 when Michael Collins, on board the Columbia said 'You cats take it easy on the lunar surface', as he released the Lunar Module, 'I think you've got a fine looking machine there, Eagle, despite the fact that you're upside-down'. But no, down on earth we were apparently talking about health policy.

Then, en route to the UK, the Canadian airport shuttle bus had a sign that 'standees' should not cross a yellow line near the driver. This led to another fleeting image of a standee as the acrobat who takes the weight of another standing on his shoulders. But no acrobatics took place in Montreal, perhaps prevented by the lack of headroom.

The reason I am musing in this self-indulgent way is that we arrived in London to celebrate the recent release of a revision of *Plain Words*, the book originally written by my grandfather, Ernest Gowers.

In 1946, the head of the UK civil service asked Gowers to write training manual - 'a pamphlet on how to write, or not to write, official English'. The original *Plain Words*, first published in 1948, became an international best-seller. There have been two revisions since then, which unfortunately drifted from the original text and lost its light touch and character in the process.

Gowers's great-granddaughter, Rebecca Gowers, has just published a new revision in which she has disregarded the second and third editions and 'directly revised the first'. Within a month Penguin's first print run of this 2014 revision sold out. There is undoubtedly still an intense interest in written English.

Why is this of interest to the Ryan Foundation?

As observers of spin and political rhetoric we long for clearer messages from politicians to the electorate: not only to be told the truth, but also not to be insulted by slick slogans. Bureaucrats are also serious culprits, still resorting to the obscure, devoted to the passive voice, when they should strive for clarity in their communications with the public they serve.

The Ryan Foundation will keep a keen eye on the language of our academics, bureaucrats and politicians, particularly watching for gobbledygook, abstractitis and polywaffle.

Gobbledygook was a name given by a Texas congressman in 1944 to jargon which sounded like turkeys 'always gobbledy gobbling and strutting with ludicrous pomposity'. It became an instantly recognized term. Gowers used it in *Plain Words*, describing it as one form of 'jargon'. In his revision of Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, published in 1965, he described jargon as:

Talk that is considered both ugly-sounding and hard to understand: applied especially to

- (1) the sectional vocabulary of a science, art, class, sect, trade, or profession, full of technical terms;
- (2) hybrid speech of different languages;
- (3) loosely the use of long words, circumlocution, and other clumsiness.

He continued:

It would be well if *Jargon* could be confined to the first sense. There is plenty of work for it there alone, so copiously does jargon of this sort breed nowadays, especially in the newer sciences such as psychology and sociology, and so readily does it escape from its proper sphere to produce popularized technicalities – words that cloud the minds alike of those who use them and those who read them.

'Abstractitis' was a term he also used in Fowler's *Modern English Usage*. The sufferer of abstractitis avoids the personal at all costs. Gowers quotes an economist whose subject, he explains, is the way in which businessmen arrive at decisions:

Whereas the micro-economic neo-classical theory of distribution was based on a postulate of rationality suited to their static analysis and institutional assumptions, we are no longer justified in accepting this basis and are set the problem of discovering the value premises suited to the expectational analysis and the institutional nature of modern business. The neo-classical postulate of rationality and the concept of the entrepreneur as the profit maximizing individual, should, I think, be replaced by a sociological analysis of the goals of the firm in relation to its nature as an organization within the socio-political system.

It is a relief Gowers told us what the writer was writing about, because if he hadn't we would still be wondering.

Writers use abstract words, Gowers wrote, because their thoughts are cloudy. The habit of using such words clouds their thoughts still further. The writers of abstract words may end by concealing their meaning not only from their readers but also from themselves.

Rebecca Gowers, in her revision, notes: "as no cure for this disease has yet been discovered, today's body of English is abundantly spotted with new abstract words". She writes that academics must now discover their own 'positionality' or be damned. Translators are forced to ruminate on the 'situationality' of what they are translating. Businesses find themselves worrying about how to 'organisationalise' useful data. Old buses are 'allocated for air-conditionisation', and companies delivering parcels require

'sortation facilities' for their toiling 'sortation facility operatives'. ... A Department for Transport document on 'highways assignments modelling techniques' gives as its first objective 'To review current and foreseeable wider modelling requirements and policy analysis requirements to identify the functionality that highway assignment modelling needs to provide to meet them.

'Plainly put', comments Rebecca Gowers, this means 'To decide how detailed our estimates of road use need to be now, and will be in future, so that we can work out how to produce the required estimates'. 'On its own', she adds, 'the phrase to "provide functionality" means nothing more than to be *able to do* something'.

'Pollywaffle' is a term the Ryan Foundation will use for political lies, such as 'non-core promises' and spin. We have been subjected to plenty of polywaffle recently, particularly when we are told we are, yet again, 'moving forward' (towards what?) after getting back on an undefined track which presumably leads to either a right- or left-wing utopia.

At this point I have to confess a closer interest in *Plain Words* than the accident of genes. In 2009 Macmillan published my biography of Ernest Gowers, who had been Senior Regional Commissioner for Civil Defence through WW2. I quoted a letter he received from the Town Clerk of a London Borough towards the end of the war:

One of my projected peace celebrations is to make in front of the Town Hall an enormous bonfire of circulars, around which the young members of the staff will perform a circular dance (like that performed at Athens on the third day of the Anthesteria) while the Borough Treasurer and I sing and play the flute and drum. I am afraid, however, that this is an idle dream as the District Auditors will still be trying to find out if the circulars meant what they said, or said what they meant, in 1953.

Fifty years has passed since *Plain Words* was written for the UK Treasury. Has anything changed? The Ryan Foundation will do its best to try to avoid these sins of circumlocution and gobbledygook, and keep an eagle eye watching for pollywaffle and abstractitis.