



The ethics of everyday language

'The ethics of language' panel at the
2007 Sydney Writers' Festival

Intro

Having kicked off today at the dizzy heights of the national political agenda, I want to talk about the ethics of language in a more everyday context: the language we experience daily at work, in the supermarket, or at our local school.

I'm talking here about something as simple as the family holiday.

Picture an average mum, dad and kids heading off to Tasmania on the new ferry service. They turn up at the quay to find their ship isn't there. So mum starts to read the fine print on the conditions of carriage, and it sounds like this:

The TT-Line reserves the right at any time to substitute one vessel for another to abandon or alter any voyage either before the commencement or at any time during the course thereof to dispatch the vessel before or after the date or hour advertised or announced for her sailing from any port to deviate from any advertised route for any purpose with liberty to sail without pilots, to proceed via any route, to proceed, return to and stay at any ports whatsoever (including the loading port) in any order in or out of the route or in contrary direction to or beyond the port of destination...

And this is only the first half of a 250-word, almost unpunctuated sentence.

Standing dockside with baggage in hand, our family is confronting the language of law. They have plenty of time to decipher the code, as their boat had already ‘dispatched’ before the advertised ‘commencement’. They think the text boils down to ‘Well, you’ve got a ticket, but we don’t have to take you anywhere’.

So our family is not sure if they have any redress, nor how to pursue it if they did. And they’re rather worried about what it might mean to head ‘in contrary direction to or beyond the port of destination’, particularly if the company takes up its ‘liberty to sail without pilots’.

Now the lawyer who wrote this drivel would argue such language is necessary to be legally exact. In a dispute, a judge fully invested in that code would know exactly what it meant, and that will keep the company safe from litigation.

And this is where we find our ethical problem: this text wasn’t written for our family, nor for anyone else boarding the Spirit of Tasmania. It was written to protect the interests of one party at the expense of another.

An equal conversation

If our public language is to be ethical, it needs to provide for a more equal participation in every transaction, whether in the mechanics workshop or at the local shop, at the insurance office or in the doctor’s office. Too often, the language deliberately turns what should be a conversation into a monologue.

The American television journalist Toni Seiple tells a disturbing story about going to her doctor with pain in her abdomen. It turned out that her uterus had slipped out of place. Her doctor told her, ‘We can fix that. It’s an easy repair’, and booked her in for surgery.

At the hospital, Toni found the ‘Informed Consent’ form almost unreadable. Nervous enough about her procedure, she could not concentrate on such dense, intimidating and confusing text. But she recalled what her doctor had said about this being an easy fix, and so she signed the form.

Only after the operation did she discover that her easy surgical ‘repair’ had in fact been a total hysterectomy.

Contrast that with my own experience of going in for a scan of a worrisome lump. The author of my ultrasound report wrote ‘this should be treated as a tumour until proven otherwise’. Now that’s pretty clear, and it gave me plenty to discuss with my doctor.

Like Toni Seiple’s physician, he initially responded rather condescendingly: ‘don’t worry, the lump will probably go away, but if you insist, we can send you off to see a surgeon.’ I insisted, and within 24 hours I was on the operating table.

Now the language in this case had allowed me to be a more equal participant in the process in a way that it hadn’t for Toni. If the technician had written ‘the results are indicative of potential malignant activity in the lower limb’, the chances of me understanding the severity and insisting on further action would have narrowed.

I had a conversation. Toni experienced a monologue. And as William Hazlitt wrote, ‘the art of conversation is the art of hearing as well as being heard’.

But how can we maximise the chances of more equal conversations in our daily commerce? I want to suggest two simple rules for a more ethical language of public exchange:

1. Say what you mean.
2. Mean what you say.

| Say what you mean

To say what you mean is the more obvious of these two. When a lift repair company was working in our office building, it posted a notice saying:

To enhance the performance of the vertical transportation, we wish to advise that the lifts are going through a readjustment program.

Why could they not write ‘we’re sorry for the delay, but we need to work on the lifts’?

A colleague of mine was once editing an engineer's report, which was explaining a construction project to a non-technical reader. One passage detailed how a pipe would need to be sprayed with cement until it *attained negative bouyancy*. She edited this to read *until it sank*. No, the engineer argued, it must read until it *attained negative bouyancy*. So it didn't sink? Well, yes. So we can write submerged, perhaps? No, because technically it *attained negative bouyancy*. And so it went.

These authors are more intent on sounding impressive, on elevating their own status rather than conversing with their readers. While sometimes the only impact is that no-one actually reads their text, at other times it can disenfranchise a reader altogether.

A famous study in the US Department of Veteran's Affairs illustrates the point perfectly. Each year this Department receives several hundred new requests for a particular veteran's benefit. It replies with a standard letter, then has counsellors available to help applicants by telephone. In one year, for 750 letters sent out, the Department received 1,128 calls. That's approaching two calls for every letter. Applicants only have 60 days before their claim is denied, and many of them found the letter so hard to follow that they missed the deadline.

When the department simplified its writing, it sent out its new letter 710 times, and received only 192 calls. The veterans now found the document effective. They became more equal participants in the conversation because the letter finally said what it meant.

Mean what you say

My second guideline for an ethical public language is to mean what you say.

Our supermarkets are full of language that does just the opposite. For years I used to buy a 'light' olive oil thinking it was lower in fat, only to discover that the lightness actually referred to its colour. I almost bought a coffee substitute that offered 'real coffee taste'. Of course the word 'taste' appears in 6 point type.

These are all saying one thing, while really implying something else altogether.

Of course, as consumers, we have the choice to walk away from that conversation by not buying the product. At other times, we cannot answer back this way. If I had walked away from my doctor, for example, I wouldn't be walking around today.

In Sydney a few years ago, daily commuters on the Sydney system all had to adjust to the new meaning for a late running train. Now to most of us, a train is late when it doesn't arrive on time. But in NSW, did you know that a train is now officially late only if it arrive 5 minutes after it was due? That's the definition that ministers use when they report on performance. But try telling that to your boss when you are late for that all important presentation.

This is what George Orwell called insincere language, purporting to say one thing while meaning something else.

Here's what one Canberra bureaucrat wrote a couple of years ago:

Government failure is a technical term that rather than implying that governments have failed, it recognises that government objectives and information can change over time. Government failure is also referred to as government policy in chapter one of this report.

You have to stop and ask yourself: do they really mean that? Or is this a conscious effort to diminish our capacity to hold up our end of the conversation?

Only when our public language says what it means and means what it says, will it finally equalise the participation of writers and readers, listeners and speakers.

And in our daily conversations, that is exactly what an ethical public language should strive to do.

Dr Neil James is Executive Director of the Plain English Foundation. He has a doctorate in English from the University of Sydney and has published over 50 articles, essays and reviews in outlets as diverse as the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *Daily Telegraph*. *Writing at Work*, his forthcoming book about writing in the workplace, will be released in September 2007.

www.plainenglishfoundation.com