

The Language of Discourse

Language is made more colorful with the use of metaphor and even the occasional cliché. Too often, though, their overuse detracts from effective discourse, rendering it stale, unimaginative and boring. In the media today, there are some examples of overuse that border on the insane. Here are my picks for worst....

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Language changes all too quickly, wouldn't you say? You become accustomed to the use of a word or words and then, one day, it means something else, or even the opposite. A quick example: 'gay' – which, in times past, simply meant joyful, happy, excited and so on. In Shakespeare's time, 'nice' didn't mean attractive, pleasant, or enjoyable; it meant the opposite. And even today, that negative connotation can be implied with suitable scorn applied to one's tone of voice – a hangover, in a way, of times past.

We're all familiar with such, hmmm, niceties of language, however; or, at least, we have some knowledge of how the English language, particularly, can play havoc with our attempts to communicate. A lot of the confusion is related to the presence of homonyms and homographs – for example, there are sixteen distinct meanings for the word 'set', while the word 'minute' is pronounced differently, depending upon whether you are speaking about the sixtieth part of an hour or something exceedingly small. Unhappily for many, there is a plethora such examples in the language. For a comical read about just *how* confusing the language is, read [here](#) what **Richard Lederer** has to say about it all.

But, it doesn't stop there: from another perspective of the writerly spectrum, we have all been verbally battered by the use of **cliché** and **metaphor** (for perhaps a millennium or two), both of which are common aspects of many languages, with English right up there with the best – or worst. Now, I'm *not* railing against the use of rhetoric and its many devices. They have their place and their uses (how else, for example, would we distinguish overused, unnecessary expression from vibrant and innovative descriptive imagery?).

Generally, I can take or leave most metaphors that are dished out to me for my reading pleasure; occasionally, though, I'm treated to something truly sublime, as I'm sure you are. Clichés however are less welcome; specifically, some of the banal phraseology in the media and general use has, I think, reached epidemic proportions – now, perhaps, even endemic.

For many years, as an example, I've wondered about any speaker/writer/lecturer/journalist who starts a sentence thus: **“To be honest with you...”** and proceeds to blithely carry on, oblivious to the implications. Does the speaker think I'd prefer a *dishonest* comment? Surely not. Just for the hell of it, I searched for the *exact* phrase and was delivered **49 million page results** – giving us all an excellent measure of its overuse. You can sample a random blog commentary I chose on the topic [here](#). So, next time you're tempted to blurt it out – please: take a

deep, deep breath and think about, “Candidly (frankly/plainly/unequivocally), I think...” before you provide your comment.

A worse turn of phrase – and much overused by almost every politician I’ve heard – is when the person starts off, “**The fact of the matter is...**” Try this thought-experiment: eliminate “of the matter” and what do you have? “The fact is...” Sounds more certain, yes? Try the other way: scratch “The fact of” and what’s left? “The matter is...” Both are effective, shorter and hence less likely to confuse – or sound pompous, as the full phrase *always* does.

Interestingly, the longer phrase has been around for a long time, according to results (68 million pages) received; one of Australia’s early poets and short story writers, **Edward Dyson**, even wrote a poem about it (that I cannot find, as yet). Some online commentators, though, think that the phrase is the same as “As a matter of fact...” I’m not so sure about that; apart from having an extra word, it just doesn’t have the same ring to it. In my opinion, “the fact of the matter is” is just a cumbersome, contrived, chiasitic banality. So, why use it?

But, get this: “As a matter of fact...” has 320+ million page results for that exact phrase – which puts it at number one spot for the most overused of all surveyed here. So, why use *either* of them? Why not just say “Actually...”, “Indeed...”, “I think that...”, “I’d suggest that...” or (politicians’ all-time-favorite) “I believe that...”?

Now, I can ignore other recent additions to language abuse, such as “Yes, we can!”, “A heck of a job!” and others, but there are, now, two words going around the planet that are so over-used, so un-necessary, so gratuitously superfluous that I’m sure all the speakers involved haven’t the foggiest idea they are just polluting the atmosphere with more CO2 – for absolutely no discernible return. That especially applies to politicians, from many countries, who are easily the most vociferous, anyway.

Unhappily, President Obama is a big offender in this regard; perhaps his speech writers more so. In January, 2011, for example, I found ten news reports with the two words in his speeches; earlier months have similar results. And that’s quite curious because it is President Obama who is now on record, **as wanting a better political discourse, which starts with clear, unencumbered language.**

I speak of these two words: “Moving forward...”

Would you believe I got thirty million page results? It’s a common use of the verb ‘move’ as my searching showed, all the way back to the 1960s and earlier. I have no quibble with normal grammatical use, like “As the train was moving forward...” and countless others. These days, however, there appears to be a contest between politicians, bureaucrats, business moguls (of all flavors) to find out who can include something like “and so, as we move forward...” or “moving forward, as we should...” or “without question, we must keep moving forward...” and so on, *ad nauseam*, with almost every public statement they make.

Don’t believe it? Listen, carefully, to your favorite public figure, next time s/he speaks. I’d bet dollars to doughnuts you’d hear it; and maybe more than once in the

same speech. We're not going to hear anybody saying "And so, as we move backward..." anytime soon, are we?

Although ... wait up a moment! Wouldn't you take more notice of a public speaker next time one of them opens a mouth to say, "And so friends, moving backward to reclaim values that..." and so on and on and on?

Sadly, as **Duke Wayne** often said: "*That'll be the day!*" Still, I'm all for truth – especially in politics.

And better language.

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