

SOME DO NOT'S FOR ORATORICAL CLARITY

by
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O r a t o r y

Part One: Verbosity, Over-Conciseness, and Profundity

DON'T BLAME THE JUDGE!

"Coach, the judge wasn't even listening to me; what a rude person!" "Coach, the judge didn't like the way I dressed." "Coach the judge missed my whole appeal; obviously I was too elevated for his mentality!" "Coach, I felt this was the best speech I ever delivered; apparently the judge can't recognize sound reasoning." Et cetera, Et cetera, Et cetera! What coach of oratory has never heard a disgruntled student returning from competition? The student, however, may have deserved a poor rating, for many reasons account for unsuccessful oratory.

.....Numerous reasons account for oratorical ineffectiveness: verbosity, over-conciseness, and profundity are among the most notorious.

SOME STUDENTS AVOID REVISION

Some students are perhaps too lazy to revise their message even though revision is mandatory for successful persuasion. The latter is evident by the practice of one of America's great orators, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. For instance, in *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt* he reports that "on some of my speeches I have prepared as many as five or six successive drafts and suggestions submitted by other people; and I have changed drafts from time to time after consulting with other people either personally or by telephone." And in *Working with Roosevelt*, Samuel Rosenman, one of Roosevelt's major advisers in helping Roosevelt prepare his speeches, states that

The speeches as finally delivered were his [Roosevelt's]—and his alone—no matter who the collaborators were. He had gone over every point, every word, time and again. He had studied, reviewed, and read aloud each draft, and had changed it again and again, either in his own handwriting, by dictating inserts, or making deletions. Because of the many hours he spent in its preparation, by the time he delivered the speech he knew it almost by heart.

In short, if a master of oratory was willing to revise

his message until he thought his message was ready for delivery, then surely all students of oratory should be willing to revise their messages. Students unwilling to improve their orations should adhere to Alexander Pope's wise observation in *An Essay on Criticism*, namely that "Whoever thinks a faultless piece to see Thinks what ne'er was, nor is, nor e'er shall be." Orations will never be perfect, but they can be made better than previous weak drafts.

SOME STUDENTS IGNORE COACHING

Some students are reluctant to seek advice from their coaches or experienced peers. This is not uncommon. For instance, in the Rhetoric Aristotle observes that "the young think they know everything and are confident in their assertions." Lord Chesterfield in a letter to his son, dated January 15, 1753, contends that "young men are apt to think themselves wise enough, as drunken men are apt to think themselves sober enough." F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Diamond as Big as the Ritz* asserts that "everybody's youth is a dream, a form of chemical madness." In *Youth and Age* Francis Bacon says that "generally youth is like the first cogitations, not so wise

as the second." And in *The Way of All Flesh* Samuel Butler remarks that "to me it seems that youth is like spring, an over-praised season—delightful if it happens to be a favored one, but in practice very rarely favored and more remarkable as a general rule, for biting east winds than gentle breezes."

The purpose of the above remarks is not to chastise young orators in general, but to urge those who allege to know more than their coaches and experienced peers do to follow the practice of Franklin Delano Roosevelt who was not too proud to seek advice. For instance, in his *Public Papers and Addresses*, the President reveals that "I have called on many different people for advice and assistance," and in *Ladies Home Journal* Eleanor Roosevelt reports that "first of all he [F.D.R.] decided on the subject with which he was going to deal, then he called in the Government officials charged with the responsibility for the work on this particular subject: for instance, if it was to be a fiscal speech, the Treasury Department and the Federal Reserve Board were consulted; if agriculture, the Department of Agriculture and allied agencies, and so on."

Students of oratory who listen to their coaches or

experienced peers need not forsake their own ideas. For example, in *The History and Criticism of American Public Address* Earnest Brandenburg and Waldo W. Braden conclude that “the opinions of experts were sought and followed, but the final decision as to ideas and the language in which they were to be couched were inevitably made by Roosevelt himself.” And Grace Tully in *F.D.R., My Boss* reports that “it should be known that the President was always the Commander-in-Chief. ...By the time a speech was delivered it was his creation, not merely an assembly line production of a corps of ghost writers.” Students of oratory should at least listen to advice before dismissing it.

SOME STUDENTS MISAPPLY LOGIC

Some orations are ineffective because flaws of argument arise from the orator’s ignorance of logical connections or misapplication of logical principles. For illustration, some orators violate principles of the Square of Opposition, namely contraries, subcontraries, superimplications, subimplications, contradictories, equivalencies, and independencies. Other orators violate principles of Induction and Deduction, making errors in the employment of evidence; in the use of examples, analogies, and causal relations; or in the application of categorical, hypothetical, alternative, disjunctive, and conjunctive enthymemes or syllogisms.

Students of oratory are not exempt from being logical, and they might improve their effectiveness by studying some of the logical processes of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. For instance, Brandenburg and Braden report in *The History and Criticism of American Public Address* that “Roosevelt was essentially inductive in logical procedure. He demonstrated both an aptness in and a fondness for the use of the example, the comparison, the analogy. He disdained vague formulas and generalities.” The authors also reported:

Many of the numerous epigrams which Roosevelt included in almost every speech are enthymematic in form. In his Fireside Chat of June 28, 1934 [for example], he summarized a portion of his argument with this terse epigrammatic statement: Our new structure is a part of and a fulfillment of the old." Within this statement there is the following implied categorical syllogism:

A part of and a fulfillment of the old is desirable.

Our new structure is a part of and fulfillment of the old.

Therefore, our new structure is desirable.

Roosevelt was fond of these statements which epitomized his thought. He believed that given a suggestive statement his auditors would supply the missing premises.

Whomever or whatever they study, students of oratory should strive to improve their logical processes, for their oratorical effectiveness should then improve.

SOME STUDENTS EMPLOY AWKWARD STYLE

Some orations are ineffective because students are verbose, profound, or truncated; fail to realize the difference in meaning between one word and another; equate concepts that ought to be kept distinct; or think they understand a piece of discourse but in fact misread it. Only by careful attention to certain features of language can orators hope to avoid these errors.

Of course, the orator’s audience is not necessarily innocent of the reason for communication breakdown. It is very possible that the orator is appropriate in presentation and the audience

inappropriate in its part, including, for instance, willfully not listening to the speech because of boredom; unpleasant surroundings, including a lack of proper heating or air-conditioning, poor acoustics, and uncomfortable seating; or biased toward the speaker or subject. However, the orator is the one who transmits the message. Therefore, the **orator** carries the **burden of proof**; the **audience** has **presumption**.

LEARNING WHAT NOT TO DO

Perhaps the most practical way to improve oratorical language is to emphasize what not to do. In other words, the orator should focus on those features which compete with clarity. This article does not treat every obstacle to clear thought, for such endeavor would be futile for any person. Instead, this article covers three of the most notorious obstacles and sufficiently warns the orator to examine carefully language usage. The author assumes from his teaching and coaching experience that, if the orator knows **what not to do**, he or she will employ **what should be done**.

DON'T BE VERBOSE!

In *A Series of Essays* Arthur Schopenhauer argues that would-be persuaders should make sparing use of the audience’s time, patience, and attention, because "to use many words to communicate few thoughts is everywhere the unmistakable sign of mediocrity. To gather much thought into few words stamps the man of genius." In his *Essay on Criticism* Alexander Pope states that "words are like leaves; and where they most abound, much fruit of sense beneath is rarely found." And in *The Tables Turned* William Wordsworth insists that "one impulse from a vernal wood may teach you more of man, of moral evil and of good than all the sages can."

Although Schopenhauer, Pope, and Wordsworth observed that an economy of words tends to embrace effective communication, some orators tend to employ unnecessary words to transmit their messages. Consider the following examples taken from Japanese and American high school, college, university, and adult education orations. Then consider the recommended versions.

VERBOSE VERSION

So let us sincerely devote ourselves to some skill and continue to do so with a strong determination.

The results happened the way they were bound to happen.

In this day and age every one of us must take care of ourselves before we send money and clothing and medicine and things like that to countries outside our borders.

We have two courses of action, and both of them will bring harm to our institution.

No matter how much they tried, they were unable to refute even one major point of the other side's case.

There is humor of the ironic sense when Eve is being tempted by the snake which is a disguise for Satan.

RECOMMENDED VERSION

So let us continuously devote ourselves to some skill.

The results were inevitable.

We must help ourselves before giving foreign aid.

Our institution faces a dilemma.

Their opposition presented an invulnerable case.

Ironic humor occurs when the Satanic snake tempts Eve.

The students employed 116 words, and the recommended versions total only 41, yet the recommended versions do not alter the students' intentions. In short, the students were unnecessarily

wordy and, thus, taxed their hearer's time and thought.

Other examples of doubletalk and their recommended versions follow.

DOUBLETALK

ostentatiously showed off
suggest some advice
cooperate together
naked without clothes
redo over again
each and every person
true facts
dishonest thief
fatty adipose
frank and honest
unselfish altruism
disappeared from sight
basic fundamentals
null and void
good advantages
dead corpse
zealous devotion
crazy psychopath
round in shape
large in size
thoroughly and wholly complete
present status quo
autobiography of her life
offensive to and not tolerant of
like a circle, always going around
bunched together
an affirmative understanding
skilled with much practice
markedly inconsistent
overly concerned being proper
plundered and forcefully robbed

RECOMMENDATION

ostentatious
suggest (or advise)
cooperate
naked (or nude)
redo
each (or every) person
facts
thief
adipose
frank (or honest)
altruism
disappeared
basics (or fundamentals)
null (or void)
advantages
corpse
zealous (or devoted)
psychopath
round
large
whole (or complete)
status quo
her autobiography
bigoted
circular
concentrated
agreement
experienced
incongruous
prudish
sacked

Some of the above examples may seem humorous, but they injure communication by unnecessarily taxing the hearers' time, diverting attention to some collateral detail, and hampering the rapid movement of thought. It should be easy to understand why an audience might become confused when trying to interpret how **true facts** differ from **facts**, how a **crazy psychopath** differs from a **psychopath**, and how a **dead corpse** differs from a **corpse**. Orators should acknowledge that verbiage does not preserve time nor transmit clear thought. They should employ only words necessary for clearly transmitting intended messages, and during speech preparation should include the employment of a good dictionary and thesaurus.

DON'T BE OVERLY CONCISE!

Horace in *Ars Poetica* says, "I labor to be brief—and manage to be obscure." Although verbosity can waste the hearer's time and cloud meaning, over-conciseness can be equally destructive.

It is true that some of history's most effective communications were brief, but clear. For instance, what discourse on the vanity of human existence is more descriptive and concise than the following words of Job?

Man that is born of a woman
is of a few days and full of trouble.
He comes forth like a flower, and withers;
he flees like a shadow, and continues not (14:1-2).

In Maureen Gallery Kovacks' translation of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Siduri is concise and clear, when advising Gilgamesh to quit his search for immortality. Siduri says:

Gilgamesh, where are you wandering?
The life that you are seeking all around you will not find.

When the gods created mankind
they fixed Death for mankind,
and held back Life in their own hands.
Now you, Gilgamesh, let your belly be full!
Be happy day and night,
of each day make a party,
dance in circles day and night!
Let your clothes be sparkling clean,
let your head be clean, wash yourself with water!
Attend to the little one who holds onto your hand,
let a wife delight in your embrace.
This is the (true) task of *mankind*.

And in F. L. Griffith's translation of *The Instruction of Ptah-hotep*, the pharaoh's vizier of the Old Kingdom of Egypt, around 2450 B.C., is concise and clear, when teaching his son not to be intellectually snobbish. Ptah-hotep says:

Be not arrogant because of your knowledge,
and be not puffed up because you are a learned man. Take counsel with the ignorant as with the learned, for the limits of art cannot be reached, and no artist is perfect in his skills. Good speech is more hidden than the precious greenstone, and yet it is found among slave girls at the millstones.

The above passages are concise, yet they lack no words necessary for an immediate clear message. However, communication often is ineffective when orators fail to employ enough words to reveal their intended thoughts. For instance, a student reported that a certain politician's "majority was thirteen hundred and ninety-two, just one hundred less than Christopher Columbus discovered America." What does the quotation mean? Perhaps the student meant to say: "Mr. Harlowe's majority was thirteen hundred and ninety-two -a number just one hundred years less than the year in which Christopher Columbus discovered America." The latter is longer, but at least the message is clearer than the original remark.

Another student stated that "the idea appealed but was not approved by the chairperson." This, too, fails to make sense. The student should have said, for example, "Although the idea was appealing, the Chairperson failed to endorse it."

Try to decipher the following statute which administrators of an old western town put on a sign: "No vehicle drawn by more than one horse is allowed to cross this bridge in opposite directions at the same time." The statute's meaning is indeed fuzzy. The administrators should have said, for example, "Whenever two or more vehicles respectively are drawn by more than one horse, and the vehicles are going in opposite directions, and they simultaneously approach this bridge, only one vehicle at a time is permitted to cross."

Another old statute states: "All marriages of White persons and Negroes and Mulattoes are illegal and void." Being overly concise, the statute seems to say that the only legally married persons in town were Indians and Orientals. This is not what the administrators intended, so they should have said, for example, "All marriages between White persons and Negroes, and all marriages between White persons and Mulattoes, are illegal and void."

Consider the married student who said, "I like golf and chess more than my wife." Rather than risk the possibility of divorce because the speaker's words do not make the wife his top priority,

the student should have said, for illustration, "I like golf and chess more than my wife does. Her favorite leisure activities are swimming and listening to classical music."

Indeed! Verbosity can hamper communication, but saying fewer words is not necessarily virtuous. Orators must discriminate between the necessary and the superfluous.

DON'T BE PROFOUND!

Profundity is language that penetrates beyond what is superficial or obvious. Much profundity is esoteric, namely abstruse or difficult to understand. Sometimes it can be fun for students learning the importance of using language concisely and clearly. For instance, in *Mother Goose Dabbles in Rhetorical Babble* Kay E. Neal describes how profundity can be playfully challenging, when students struggle trying to identify the following versions of (1) "Mary Had A Little Lamb," (2) "Little Jack Homer," and (3) "Mary, Mary Quite Contrary."

(1) A female of the Homo Sapiens species was the possessor of a small, immature ruminant of the genus Ovis, the outermost covering of which reflected all wavelengths of visible light with luminosity equal to that of mass of naturally occurring microscopically crystalline form of hydrogen oxide. Regardless of the translational pathway chosen by Homo Sapiens female, there was a 100% correlation to the pathway selected by the aforementioned ruminant.

(2) A young male human was situated near the intersection of two supporting structural elements at right angles to each other; said subject was involved in ingesting a saccharine composition prepared in conjunction with the ritual observance of an annual fixed-day religious festival. Insertion into the saccharine composition of the opposite digit of his forelimb was followed by removal of a drupe of genus Prunus. Subsequently the subject made a declarative statement regarding the high quality of his character as a young male human.

(3) A human female, extremely captious and given to opposed behavior, was questioned as to the dynamic state of her cultivated tract of land devoted to production of various flora. The tract components were enumerated as argentous tone-producing agents, a rare species of oceanic growth, and pulchritudinous young females in a linear orientation.

Indeed, the above profundity is playful as a learning device, but profundity should never be employed in formal oratory. Much sarcasm has been launched at profundity in general. For example, in his Preface to *The Tale of a Tub*. Jonathan Swift says, "Where I am not understood, it shall be concluded that something very useful and profound is couched underneath." In *Patience* W. S. Gilbert states that, "if this young man expresses himself in terms too deep for me, Why, what a very singularly deep young man this deep young man must be!" In *Out Of My Life and Thought* Albert Schweitzer remarks that "any profound view of the world is mysticism." And in *Reflexious* Vauvenargues contends that, "when a thought is too weak to be expressed simply, it is a proof that it should be rejected."

In the New York *Evening Mail* of January 23, 1918, H. L. Mencken says that "the best teacher, until one comes to adult pupils, is not the one who knows most, but the one who is most

capable of reducing knowledge to that simple compound of the obvious and the wonderful which slips into the infantile comprehension." In *Les Caractères* La Bruyère argues that "the greatest things gain by being expressed simply: they are spoiled by emphasis." And in *Epicoene or The Silent Woman*, Ben Jonson states, "Give me a look, give me a face, That makes simplicity a grace: Robes loosely flowing, hair as free: Such sweet neglect more taketh me Than all the adulteries of art: They strike mine eyes, but not my heart."

All of the above sarcasm supports Samuel Taylor Coleridge when he says in *The Complete Works* of Samuel Taylor Coleridge that, "if men would say only what they have to say in plain terms, how much more eloquent they would be." The following examples justify the aforementioned criticism.

In *Fallacy - The Counterfeit of Argument* W. Ward Fearnside and William B. Holther refer to a famous philosopher who argued that

since the meaning of "Peter" is the identical man we knew before, see now, and will recognize tomorrow, the meaning of anything at all is its identity. Moreover, since the meaning of anything to an organism is precisely the value that something has for the organism, this identical recurrence means the value that something has. Thus all value depends on identity. For this reason, pluralistic accounts of the world, as they stress directness and change instead of the unity, the identity of experience, destroy value and are meaningless.

The authors wisely conclude that, "if you do not understand this bit of philosophizing, do not worry: it is unintelligible."

Also consider the student who tried to impress her college Speech instructor and peers during the first day of classes by informing them that "felines of all species are cinereous when the earth becomes enveloped in tenebrosity ." Instead of confusing her hearers, she could have said, for instance, that "all cats are gray in the dark." That is what she intended.

Students of oratory would be wise to prevent themselves from becoming part of the group Arthur Schopenhauer indicts in *A Series of Essays*, namely those who attempt "to wrap up trivial ideas in grand words, and to clothe their very ordinary thoughts in the most extraordinary phrases, the most far-fetched, unnatural, and out-of-the-way expressions."

CONCLUSION

Numerous reasons account for oratorical ineffectiveness, and verbosity, over-conciseness, and profundity are among the most notorious. Perhaps other examples will appear in future articles in *Rostrum*.

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