

Mind Your Language!

A Sea of Ruined Words

by James O. Tate

One of the fascinations of language, and one of the charms of the English language in particular, is the playful resourcefulness, the lexical richness, and the ambiguous suggestiveness of words themselves. And as the English language is the most agglomerative of them all, we are constantly aware of new vocabulary and usage, some of which must be rejected. The track of “new” words is charted in the best dictionaries, so that we can see something about such established and unobtrusive exoticisms or old new words as *assassin*, *tangerine*, and *ketchup* and understand exactly what we are saying when we say those words, and how long we have been saying them. I must point out that my three examples are not abstractions, so that they preserve some precision inherently. Language is evolutionary, semantics drift, stuff happens. That goes with the territory—it is inherent in our nature and in the nature of language. We do not want, or should not want, language to be too orderly or utopian, as in some positivist fantasy of a one-to-one correspondence of word and thing or of signifier and signified. The discourse of spiritual reflection or of poetry, the elbow room for humor, would be reduced or impossible in such a condition.

But, of course, that fantasy has been entertained by philosophers and sages over the years, only some few of whom deserve much attention or respect. The story of the Académie Française is well known; that of the Italian analogue, less so. Recently, the Brazilian constituents of the regnant Portuguese authority won a power struggle by the weight of their numbers and are now the masters of the Portuguese tongue—and they sanction all those Brazilian neologisms and solecisms and slang that the Old World fogies had discountenanced. Surely, such a story is linguistically familiar and even predictable.

The more we know about language, the more we know about change, but the changes seem to go in one direction. Even the language of criminals, as we know it from 400 or 200 or 100 years ago, seems quaint today, and not only quaint—it seems dignified and admirable. A highwayman or stick-up artist used to say such things as “Stand and deliver!” or “Your money or your life!” or even “Stick ’em up!” What they say today is unprintable except in a Hollywood screenplay.

The phenomenon of linguistic entropy has drawn the attention of some of the greatest writers in the history of our language, including Dryden, Swift, Pope, and Johnson, to name but four. Swift was no positivist, but he proposed an Academy to police the English tongue, as did Defoe, and Johnson produced his Dictionary, which is nothing if it is not authoritative, or idiosyncratically authoritarian. Swift and Pope in particular,

in masterpieces of imaginative projection and mordant irony too well known to cite, showed the consequences of verbal deformation and its human and political implications. And that was in the good old days.

Today, I would be the last to recommend any established authority over our language, and for several reasons. One: Without Swift and Johnson, even the idea seems silly. Two: An English Academy would likely be equal in quality to the rest of our institutions. Three: The manifest failure of the American educational system does not suggest any success for utopian projects. Four: The organs of communication are devoted to the destruction of “standard English.” Five: Until English is reestablished as the national language, any such project would be wishful thinking.

But not having an Academy does not mean that we do not have any authorities, or that the editors of dictionaries do not sanction the abuse of words, particularly in the political arena or the zone of public debate. The authority today is not an individual genius like a Jonathan Swift or a Samuel Johnson but a faceless pack of credentialed poseurs who adjust the language to fit the latest rage or fashion or imposture or abuse. We can sense the presence and the pressure of illegitimate authority when the clerisy suddenly is of one mind about contentious issues, and when, therefore, the language has to be distorted to justify an analogous deformation of morals or politics or forms. And, above all, we sense the presence and the pressure of willful distortion when the tone of modern skepticism bizarrely, even violently, swivels to its opposite: the tone of reverential unction and pompous sanctimony. And let me add that this mawkishly elevated tone is invariably found in connection with disagreeable causes, and add further that this tone also signifies that an abstraction has been twisted from its base.

Back during the contested election of 2000, that unremarkable politician Al Gore was heard to intone operatically the phrase “our democracy” as a sort of mantra; it was a kind of music that referred to his own selfish interest but presented it as a noble cause—our cause. Yet, to what was he referring? The word *democracy* is not mentioned in our founding documents. We do not live in a democracy, as Al knows perfectly well after a life of privilege, after all those years of “fundraising” or solicitations of bribes, after all the lying that he has done, and after he translated the phrase *E pluribus unum* to mean the opposite of what its elementary Latin denotes. Add to that, Al managed to discuss the election of 2000 without mentioning the Electoral College, that superb antidemocratic instrument established by the antidemocratic authors of the Constitution, as though the election were a mere plebiscite. And indeed, in a painful and prophetic moment, Ross Perot had, not many years before, pro-

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posed national instant plebiscites boosted by computers as a new method of decisionmaking. How revealing it is that the politicians cannot refer even to the simplest processes without fudging and hedging about forms and words! Did Ross never read the Constitution or understand the delegation of authority or the principle of representative government in a federal republic? He seems to have believed that polls actually have some substantive meaning.

No, we do not live in a “democracy,” nor should we wish to. The term comes to us from the Greeks and from Aristotle, who used it invidiously to mean the degeneration of “polity,” or true politics in a real community; and he insisted, because he had evidence, that democracy would lead to civil war and then to tyranny. The “mixed constitution” that he advocated is quite similar to the one that we have, or had before the prevaricators and equivocators got to it—a system of countervailing powers that is designed to last. The word *democracy* means a lot in our day—I mean, it makes a lot of music—but it does *not* mean what it denotes, the rule by the *demos* or common people. Because 200 years of abuse and propaganda take their toll, the word *democracy* should be confined to classes in political theory and discussions of Aristotle. Used in any other way, the word seems to be a noise like the growl of a dog—one connoting hostility, a warning of trouble, *etc.* We have come to hear “democracy” routinely cited as a *casus belli* in the Middle East—one listed alongside instruments of mass destruction that no one has been able to find. The situation is bizarre: The Iraqis are supposed to develop what they have never had, but Aristotle always referred to the results of past practice and to historical experience. *Democracy* does *not* denote, though it is being used to mean or connote musically, “a friendly government that we install,” or “secular government, in an area of large oil deposits and Islamic fanaticism,” or “a government that includes humans with utera and glands of lactation in military decisionmaking.” Nor does it mean “emasculated satrapy,” though that might well be the preferred, accurate, or honest term.

So the word *democracy*, so loved by the thoughtful and concerned, seems to be a source of confusion—and that is why it is loved. It is a word to watch out for, like “Brooklyn Bridge” coming from a “salesman.” People do have common sense, however, and, if you observe, they are often highly undemocratic in their behavior, values, and decisions. They like to make their own judgments about priorities. They want elite advice and service when it comes to investments, real estate, jet flights, heart surgery, *etc.* No one ever says that the *corps de ballet* should be a bunch of clumsy slobs, or that the short stop for the Dodgers should not be keen of eye and fleet of foot. But when we raise the level of abstraction, good sense goes out the window—and that is precisely why we raise the level of abstraction.

Democracy is not the only ruined and ruinous word, of course. There are too many others that are the signs, or rather the noises, of impending fraud, violence, or deceit. *Feminism* is one of these. Now you and I know something about the history of this word, its roots in the 18th century, its literature in the 19th century in its heroic age, and the suffrage of women in the 20th century. The meaning of *feminism* seems to have been rather clear for many decades. Yet I came to doubt that this was so when I was called a “feminist” by a feminist. What

did that mean? It meant that I had done something “supportive” for a female of surpassing gifts because I recognized her talent and her need. But that hardly made me a saloon-wrecking temperance advocate or a bra-burning nutcase. Yet so I was called, because words, especially political words, are routinely used without precision, without respect, and even, as in my case, without identifiable meaning. Recently, like *democracy*, *feminism* has been used many times to justify war in Afghanistan and in Iraq, and this by “conservatives.” To reform a country’s politics by violence is a tall order when it goes against the established culture, but since MacArthur did it in Japan after the dropping of two atomic bombs on civilians who were for once, apparently, *not* “innocent,” “feminism” has taken the place of “freedom of the seas” as a *casus belli*. This suggests that there has always been something corrupt about the word *feminism*, and that it relates not to advocacy of the oppressed but to lust for power. Though *feminism* is supposed to be “democratic,” it actually is not, because it has already established a series of reserved powers, quota systems, judicial seats, special issues, and many other privileges that make it inherently an obstacle to civil discourse, to rational discussion, to precision of language, and, above all, to the election of excellence.



Melanie Anderson

So while I have the opportunity (and I wish to thank the humans of the male “gender” who offered it to me), I believe it would be a service to culture and general knowledge as well as vital for the national interest if I continued my discourse on the noise, rather than the “meaning,” of words. And in that spirit, I do not find any lack of occasions, offenses, or examples. Having left off with *feminism*, we can glance at such grotesque formulations as “reproductive rights,” which does not mean what it apparently says but is, rather, a gnostic claim to the right of women to kill their own children, and one which is unquestionable, a universal human right, one that is protected by the Constitution, which protects it absolutely by never mentioning it. The related euphemism, or willfully misleading construction, “pro-choice,” is offset by the equally political “pro-life,” which suggests that “pro-choice” means “pro-death,” and for some reason. But a living child is not the common noun or even abstraction “life,” and, if that child is a “choice,” then she is something less than a human creature.

Running rapidly along, we find so many examples of noise and bluster and blather that I hardly know which to take up

next. Sheer irritation (and, by the way, *aggravation* does not mean “irritation,” though it is used so often that it has come to “mean” what it does not “say” etymologically)—irritation, as I say, suggests a look at the word *racism*, which is rarely used correctly and precisely. Let us begin with what *racism* does not mean. It does not mean “something I don’t like”—for that, we have the expression “Ugh.” It does not mean “any form of ethnocentrism or xenophobia,” for such limitations are integral to culture and identity in the anthropological sense. Tribal identity is not an “ism.” So what does *racism* mean? It would seem to apply most properly to basically 19th-century claims to a racial basis for civilization, claims which amount to an unscientific ideology, as, for example, from Count Gobineau and others. That brings us back to what *racism* does not mean, and I can be exact about the point. *Racism* does not mean that, when a hurricane named after a person of the female sex inundates the most culturally distinctive as well as the most ill-situated major urban area in the United States, and when, as a result, many people of color and some of none were unable or unwilling to leave that urban area, and when buses failed to arrive in a timely fashion to transport said persons, that we had a manifest demonstration of racism and even institutional racism at the city, state, and federal levels. No, *racism* does not mean that, though people keep saying it does.

Consider also the related term *discrimination*, which has been badly bent by the phrase “racial discrimination.” Nowadays, many or even most seem to think that *discrimination* is a pejorative word, when, in truth, it is a term of approbation, as in the sentence, “He is a most discriminating person.” “Discrimination” means informed and deliberate choice, and

so involves judgment. This would suggest that “judgment” is also bad, and so we get the term *judgmental*, which means little but “bad.” But if we cannot choose or judge, then to whom do we concede those powers?

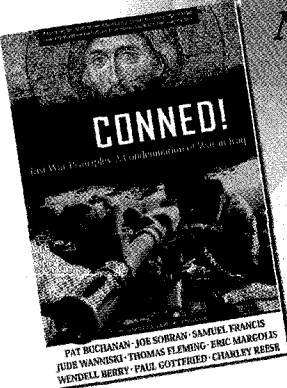
Fascism, being historically grounded, should be a word that we can use precisely, but we rarely encounter it that way. It has degenerated into a vague term of abuse, meaning roughly “Booooo!” *Fascism* is usually used to reject authority by people who prefer chaos, and that is a shame, because the etymology of that word is revealing, and because the image of the fasces appears on the walls of the Capitol and on the back of the Roosevelt dime. There have been some discreet adjustments of the images of our inheritance, which must have been too Western, womanless, and white for “our democracy.”

Such historical erasure brings us inevitably to the master words of power of our time, *multiculturalism* and *diversity*. I say that *multiculturalism* is a relatively straightforward term as such manipulations go—it is an open admission in itself that “assimilation” is over and an announcement that the United States does not have a culture to be respected. *Diversity* is more deceptive, and strains against its own derivation. It is a deception concerning social engineering, curricular destruction, racial quotas, and much else that has been incisively analyzed by Peter Wood in his *Diversity: The Invention of a Concept* (2003). Recommending your attention to his thorough treatment, I have to think of much-abused words such as *equality* and *education*, and I can only close by invoking the names of Jonathan Swift and George Orwell, who set unforgettable examples for precision of language and devotion to truth—examples that are instructive and helpful even today. ☐

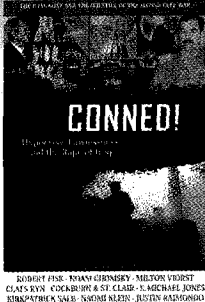
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Manners, Morals, Language

Forsaking the *Beau-Ideal*

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.



Melanie Anderson

Excepting deconstructionists, who believe there really is no such thing to begin with, most people who are at all conscious of language are in agreement that it exists in degraded form today. Similarly, those who do not make a point of being self-consciously “of the people” (as the British used to say), or do not believe vulgar language to be a mark of honesty and authenticity, concur that manners have sunk to a state of corruption unheard of, apparently, since the invention of writing, no record having come down to us from so deep a deportmental abyss. (In the cave paintings of Lascaux, families seated about their cookfires in backward baseball caps to eat their evening meal are not depicted.) The critics who deplore the decline of language, and those who decry the decay in manners, are not, however, always—or even ordinarily—the same people; nor are the double phenomena typically presented as being somehow connected except in the most general sense, as in the collapse of civilization overall. And yet it seems reasonable and even obvious, when we think about it, that behaving properly means thinking properly, and that thinking properly is a matter of understanding and, even more, respecting the language we think in—in which we can *only* think and, therefore, *must* think.

There is, first, the empirically verifiable fact that carelessness in any single aspect of human address leads to, if it does not originally reflect, carelessness in others as well. Carelessness in language as in manners, unlike deliberate sloppiness—a form of behavior whose price is eternal perverse vigilance on behalf of its

slovenly credo—is an habitual thing, and habit cannot be compartmentalized in anyone’s mind. But there are more specific connections as well between the destruction of manners and the destruction of morals than the general civilizational connection or that of simple habit, links that have to do with the particular nature of language, on the one hand, and manners, on the other. And these connections, once made, explain the existence of another element in the dual relationship that we see now as a triangular one: that of morals and morality.

If correct behavior depends on right thinking, and right thinking on the right use of language, then we may say that, in terms of active influence, the sequence actually proceeds the other way: Language > thought > behavior. (Though action *may*, in some instances, influence thought—more likely, rethought—it seems a stretch to try to imagine behavior leading to a rethinking of language itself.)

Before we know how properly to act—that is, what sort of action suits us as human beings—we have to know what we truly *are*, what our human nature *is*. The only way to gain such knowledge lies in thought and reflection, activities made possible only by the medium of those designative symbols we call words, amounting collectively to language. But language, as the instrument of human thought, is an effective instrument only when it is an instrument honestly employed. And honest usage, in language, means using words as they were intended to be used—that is, as they are commonly understood to be used—and using them in no other way. Further, it means arranging words in patterns that conform to a commonly accepted logic, and not logic in some eccentric or private form. In all matters of language, as in those involving money, we need to recognize that “honestly” implies “carefully,” even if careless-

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