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The Human Condition and the English Language

In *Politics and the English Language*, George Orwell points out that the use of stale political phrases show that a writer has stopped thinking. And while we have escaped some of this language in our political discussions, we are still confined by the new versions of meaningless phrases. In the everyday life ordinary people try to confront ordinary problems and casually use such expressions as “role models,” “closure” and other examples of psychological Newspeak.

The first question, of course, to ask is why such language is attractive, aside from ease of use. I think that the answer is in the crypto-scientific aspect of its provenance. When you say “role model”, instead of “example,” you imply the existence of some comforting technical or psychological mechanism. A “role model” implies that everything about human beings is adjustable, and that nothing comes from the depths of one’s existence. That is, if one is playing the “role” of a father, such activity doesn’t come from the experience of having realized that one has a child, but from some external and completely artificial influence. A “role” is something that can be “chosen” and worn like this year’s fashion. It is appallingly glib, remote from actual experience, and obscures what it is like to be human.

It is this last item, the covering up of reality, that is the most seductive aspect of such words. Being a father is not a role. It is a fact. You either do a good job or a bad job, or you are up to it or you aren’t. You can accept your responsibilities or you can try to wiggle out of them. But these are not “roles.” They are who and what you are.

But let us not put too much weight on one phrase. Let us move on to “closure,” which is Newspeak for resolution. Often “closure” is used in combination with “seeking,” which is Newspeak for wanting. The scientific provenance here probably comes from surgery, as in closing an

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incision, but whatever the source it still has a scientific association and suggests a mechanism that is far more controllable and useful than the simple fact of coming to terms with grief.

But, I hasten to add, the crypto science of this word also diminishes the reality of being human, since the scientific or grand hokum it implies is contained only in the phrase, like the qualities of something advertised on TV, but not in day to day existence. The facts are that one accepts difficulty and is better for it or is hurt by it, or some combination of these possibilities. Closure implies some clinically certified process, which, as nearly as I can tell, is an illusion. No euphemism is going to gloss over the need to accept what has happened. No fuzzy word is going to make the resolution of unpleasantness any easier. In fact, it will only blind you to what is going on.

Of course there are many of these phrases and words. We say “self esteem” for vanity (although I am not sure if this is what it really means), “domestic abuse” for wife or husband beating, “co-dependent” for assisting, “at risk” for being vulnerable. And, if Orwell pointed out that the use of worn out phrases is a way of not thinking clearly, Norman Mailer once wrote that the essence of totalitarian prose is its vagueness. What is more vague than a term like “self esteem?” Does it mean vanity, egotism, selfishness, or a pathological indifference to others? After all, murderers seem to have a high opinion of themselves.

Mostly we laugh at these phrase and words, but the truth is they have a surprising ability to persist even though we know they are silly. The reason for this is that we are seduced by the pleasantness of not saying what we really mean or not seeing what is really there. For instance, if we see a circumstance in which someone is behaving badly, we can shield ourselves from these actions by saying this person “never had a good role model.”

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Here is what we avoid by saying this. We do not have to think about the possibility that this person may be corrupt, morally ugly, and incorrigible. We do not have to say that this is a tragic circumstance in which a human being is acting in such a way as to be repellent. We do not have to live with the fact that a large part of what people do is not going to change. After all, we have had thousands of years of trying to do better, and while we have made progress, there are some things that seem to be getting worse. We have always had murder on a large scale, but the last hundred years has shown how we can increase the killing with the judicious application of technology.

Words like “dysfunctional” have the effect of diminishing human beings. When we think that these imprecise and vaguely technical words accurately portray humanity, we are saying that we are somehow small, easily managed creatures, so much like machines, who only need a little tinkering. You can see what a diminishing effect the sensibility of this language has when you say that King Lear was a man who didn’t have a good “role model”. If this is true, does his tragedy still seem so large and does it still make people seem so important?

This language has another danger. Once you are in the habit of hiding reality, or of avoiding what it means to be human, it is easy to become sloppy in political matters. If you can speak of someone’s lack of a role model, it is far easier to speak of “ethnic cleansing” when you mean systematic murder.

Psychological Newspeak exists for the same reason that political jargon of the past existed. We are lazy. We do not want to consider just what it is we are trying to say, or what it is we are covering up by using this ready made sensibility. We do not try to say what we think as clearly as we can. Just as Orwell pointed out that political language is a matter of using tired phrases as to avoid saying clearly what we think, I’d

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like to point out that we are doing the same with popular psychological language. It is time to do two things. To laugh at each new example that comes our way, and, as Orwell suggested, to throw these words into the trash can where they so richly deserve to be.