

1977

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Recommended Citation

Newman, Edwin (1977) "The State of American English," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 30 : No. 3 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol30/iss3/4>

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Our language is a rich and noble instrument, capable of expressing clearly our everyday thoughts and eloquently our more profound ones. It is, as Professor Higgins reminded Eliza Doolittle, the language of Shakespeare, Milton and the Bible. Speaking at the Fifth Military Media Conference, Edwin Newman used a series of horrible, but funny examples to emphasize his plea for clear speaking and writing. Since we think in words, fuzzy, pompous and redundant language inevitably leads to a corruption of our thoughts.

THE STATE OF AMERICAN ENGLISH

by

Edwin Newman

It is typical of American English that enough is almost never enough. Cecil Smith, television critic of the *Los Angeles Times*, considered CBS' Bicentennial Minutes not merely unique but singularly unique. Senator Abraham Ribicoff of Connecticut was worried not only about nuclear proliferation but about the spread of nuclear proliferation. When there was a report that Senator Barry Goldwater had condoned organized crime in Arizona, he said it was not only ridiculous but completely untrue, in contrast to being ridiculous but true.

Would it be premature to discuss new financial arrangements for New York City? No, says *The New York Times*, it would be "too premature." Is the Mississippi low? No, says an airline pilot, "The river is low, water level-wise." During the scare over swine flu, the Pittsburgh health office postponed the shots—temporarily. I have even been

sent a label identifying a handbag as manmade vinyl, there being no more wild vinyl roaming the Great Plains.

Was a police raid on a New York after-hours club kept secret? No, said UPI, it was successfully kept secret. Do students select areas for study? They preselect them. I stayed at the Sheraton-Universal Hotel in Los Angeles not long ago. A sign in the room asked guests to switch off the lights and air-conditioning and television set when leaving, so as to avoid "unnecessary waste" of power. Necessary waste was all right.

All of this is redundancy, to which Americans have become addicted. A large part of American speech and writing is unnecessary, boring, and makes much reading and conversation a chore. We slog through the laborious and repetitious, and tarry when we should be moving on. Redundancy's cause is triumphant.

The United States is the most

wasteful country in the world, and our use of words is extravagant. This has two causes. One is the feeling that an idea is more effective if it is repeated and reinforced. That is why Jimmy Carter described the international situation in early January as very dormant. It is why he said that the place where he would meet Leonid Brezhnev would depend not merely on a mutual decision but on "a mutual decision between us." You can't be too careful when dealing with the Russians.

We have reached the point in the United States where it is not enough for children to get an education, or even a good education. They must have, according to the latest fashion, a quality educational experience. Which they would get, by the way, not in a school system but, according to the New York State commissioner of education, Ewald Nyquist, in a total learning enterprise.

When the Colorado State Library wants to suggest some reading for children who learn slowly, it puts out not merely a bibliography but a bibliography of books. What kind of books? Books of easy difficulty. For what kind of reading? Here the Colorado State Library invents a word. Recreatory reading. It could have been worse. It could have been recreation-oriented.

We have reached the point where even the word widow is thought not to get the idea across. *The Corning*, New York, *Leader* says of a woman who died, "She was the widow of August Bottcher, who predeceased her."

The second reason for this wastefulness is a failure to understand what the words used mean. *The New York Times* would not run the headline, "Modest rise looms in capital spending," if it knew what modest meant or what loom meant. The man at NBC in charge of assigning new telephone numbers would not preplan for them if he knew what plan meant. The weather forecaster at the CBS station in Washington would not say, "Tomorrow afternoon, the

temperature will gradually plummet. . . ."

Dr. John Lundgren, looking after Richard Nixon, said in January 1975, "He still tires and fatigues very easily. When you tire *and* fatigue, you are *really* worn out. Lt. Gen. James F. Hollingsworth, when he was U.S. Commander in South Korea, said that if the North Koreans attack, "Our firepower will have a tremendous impact on their ground troops, breaking their will in addition to killing them." This dual purpose explains why the United States must have sophisticated weapons.

At that, General Hollingsworth's language is preferable to that of Gen. Alexander Haig, who is the Commander in Europe for NATO. Rather than say that NATO forces were not as ready as he'd like them to be, General Haig said that they were "not optimized in a posture of essential preparedness." What makes this sort of language attractive to those who use it is that it introduces an unnecessary abstruseness, overtones of complexity. It is increasingly characteristic of life in the United States, where engaged couples are said to be in a commitment situation, and where an economist may refer to work as labor force participation. In Seattle, federal officials who had to decide whether snow was so heavy that employees should be told to stay at home established a "four-sided matrix" that drew "data" from "four information providers." This enabled them not to know whether the roads could be used but to "monitor the condition of the ingress and egress routes."

Matrix is becoming popular. An educator in Massachusetts wrote to me that not long ago, he was asked to prepare an activities matrix. It turned out to be a schedule. The same man told me about a letter he received advising him that a new staff member would shortly begin work. The letter said: "Ms. _____ will begin executing her professional skills on January 4, 1977."

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My correspondent felt sorry for the skills, which hadn't done anything wrong.

In Canada, where they also go in for this sort of thing, at a meeting on urban problems in Toronto, elevators in tall buildings were classified as "vertical high speed transportation systems." It is everywhere. During the winter, when the roads around Buffalo were covered with snow, it was not said that they were blocked or impassable or even covered with snow. Drivers were told that there was "limited lane availability." In Boston, the Metropolitan District Commission did not want to say "Keep off the ice." It urged that "all persons terminate using any body of water under MDC control for any ice-related recreation or walking." Again, it could have been worse. It could have been ice-related recreation-oriented activity.

Why is such language used? Self-importance, of course, but also because it serves as a fence that keeps others outside and respectful, or leads them to ignore what is going on inside because it is too much trouble to find out. For those inside, either effect is useful. That is why psychologists will not speak of someone as independent or self-reliant. They will say that that person has a high personal autonomy quotient. A librarian won't say that he offers many services but multifaceted services. The chief of police in Madison, Wisconsin, spoke of the jail as "a total incarceration facility," and police cars in Seattle are now mobile response units.

There is, of course, a technique involved, but it is easy to grasp. Never say that a tank may spring a leak. Say there may be a "breach of containment." Never say of a product that people won't buy it. Say that it "met consumer resistance." Don't say that the unusual winter we went through damaged or hampered the economy. Say that it impacted on the economy. Then, if you are an economic forecaster,

you can say later that pentup consumer demand will deimpact the effects of the winter.

A copying machine should not be said to have jammed. It is in an "incorrect paper misfeed situation." Don't say that you have a job where you deal with many people. Say that you have a people-intensive position. In Knoxville, Tennessee, a nurse won a product-naming contest with the suggestion that dust covers for medical equipment be called instead "sterility maintenance covers." That was worth \$500 and a luncheon in the Andrew Jackson ballroom of the Hyatt Regency Hotel.

At that rate, somebody in the Federal Energy Research and Development Administration should get millions for renaming windmills. They are now "wind energy conversion systems."

I want to turn now to what I take to be the new national pastime. It is izing. A reporter I know, covering a visit by President Ford to Boston, asked the Secret Service where he could park his car. The Secret Service could not help. What should he do, then? "If I were you," the Secret Service man replied, "I would put myself in a chaufferized situation."

In New York City, *The New York Times* talked about pedestrianizing part of the area around Times Square—that is, keeping cars out—and a city official talked about cosmetizing it by putting in some sidewalk cafes. *The New York Times* has also spoken about a handsome new furniture store that was balconized; the Minnesota Vikings quarterback, Fran Tarkenton, has said that his company, Behavioral Systems, Inc., functions in a methodized way—I believe that it is, however, nonsectarian; in Denver, Colorado, the First Unitarian Society announced formation of working groups following prioritization of alternative uses; and in Santa Rosa, California, a city commissioner asked this question: "Are we prioritizing with their input?" For the sake of Santa Rosa, let's hope so.

During the last football season, a man broadcasting the Kansas-Missouri game said that one of the players "suffered self-tacklization." Whether he meant the man tripped himself or was tackled by one of his teammates, I don't know. In Canada, an official putting forms into French and English was said to have done valuable work in bilingualizing them. All forms are created lingual, and some are more lingual than others.

Sports broadcasters often have only a shaky grip on grammar and on the connection between words and meaning. During the last football season, Keith Jackson of ABC told his viewers that because of the way some of the boxes in the Superdome were placed, he could not visually see them.

Tom Brookshier of CBS, who usually contents himself with saying of somebody who made a good play, "He's come a long way from South Carolina," which of course is not always true, if, for example, the game is being played in Atlanta, and with such comments on quarterbacks as, "There is no comparison between he and Staubach," surpassed himself during the Ali-Norton fight. After the sixth round, Brookshier said, "Ali looks over his shoulder at him with disdain and maybe respect."

Some of the others aren't much better. Pat Summerall of CBS has said, "The United States is in good shape Davis Cupwise." In Cincinnati, a baseball announcer, speaking about the pitcher, Don Gullett, said, "Well, Don's speed was good tonight, but stuffwise, he wasn't all that great." It reminded me of something Earl Monroe of the New York Knicks said: "We really need to win tonight. It will put us in the right frame of mind mentalwise."

They love to tack on that abominable suffix, wise, in sports. They also love the all-American phrase, "Y'know." An NBC colleague told me that he heard a professional basketball player explain that he worried a great

deal about being injured and about the impossibility of saying when it might happen. He said: "Y'know . . . How do you know? Y'know?"

I have also been told by a reader in New Hampshire that he heard the heavyweight, Joe Baksi, when asked how he thought a fight would come out, reply that he did not want to make any predicaments. Which is understandable. The same reader insists that he once heard the explanation that a fighter had to retire early because of a detached retina. Evidently he didn't like to be alone.

This sort of thing is by no means confined to the world of sports, full of rough diamonds as we know it to be. For example, we have all heard about alleged victims. They have become confused in some journalistic minds with intended victims, but intended victims are sometimes rendered as would-be victims, who apparently go out in the hope of being robbed or assaulted.

A Texas newspaper, *The Corpus Christi Caller*, was full of pride when a Texas woman, Anne Armstrong, was named Ambassador to London. "Anne Armstrong ready to take Texas flare to London," it said. That's flare, f-l-a-r-e. Take up this torch.

Another Texas paper, the *Brownsville Herald*, headlined a story about deaths on the highway: "Texas Motorcides Below Expectations." We've all heard about engines that died.

I don't want to appear to be picking on just one state. A man who got a parking ticket in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, sent me the receipt for payment of the fine. At the bottom were these words: "Obey all traffic violations."

An ironic thing is happening in the United States. As we demand more and more personal openness from those in public life—unwisely, it seems to me—our language becomes more and more covered, obscure, turgid, ponderous and overblown. The candor expected of public officials about their health, their

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money, their private lives, or what used to be thought of as their private lives, is offset in public matters by language that conceals more than it tells, and often conceals the fact that there is little or nothing worth telling.

We increasingly expect of those holding office an accounting of their financial holdings and their health. There are those who want a panel of psychiatrists to examine all who seek high office, to determine whether they can be trusted with public affairs and with their private ones. The way things are going, there will probably be a demand that those in public life give assurances that their sexual undertakings leave them without anxiety and ready to turn to affairs of state without lurid dreams that trouble their minds. This demand will be strengthened by its having been reported that by the time Watergate reached its dénouement, Richard and Pat Nixon had not slept together in 14 years. During the furor over the liaison between Wayne Hays, then chairman of the House Administration Committee, and Elizabeth Ray, the novelist, the Speaker of the House, Carl Albert, dealing with reports of orgies in his office, felt it necessary to say that he was 68 and had not slept with a woman all year. (It was early June.)

It is easy to understand the insistence that public men and women tell all, especially after Vietnam, Watergate, the resignation of a President and Vice President, and various financial scandals and sexual escapades. What we ought to be demanding is that our leaders speak better English, so that we know what they are talking about and, incidentally, so that they do. Some safety does lie in more sensible public attitudes, especially toward the public relations and advertising techniques now widely used by politicians. It lies in understanding

that there can be many sources of leadership in the country, not the White House alone. It lies also in independent reporting by those of us in the news business, and in greater skepticism on the part of the public, and in an unremitting puncturing of the overblown. In all of this, language is crucial.

I have been told that my view is cranky and pedantic, that I want to keep the language from growing, and to impose a standard and rigid English on Americans. Far from it. Our language should be specific and concrete, eloquent where possible (for eloquence is hard to come by), playful where possible (for wit is given to few) and personal, so that we don't all sound alike.

American English, drawing on so many regional differences, so many immigrant groups, and such a range of business, farming, industrial, athletic and artistic experiences, can have an incomparable richness. Instead, high crimes and misdemeanors are visited upon it, and those who commit them do not understand that they are crimes against themselves. The language belongs to all of us. We have no more valuable possession.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



A graduate of the University of Wisconsin, Edwin Newman began his career in journalism in 1941. Following duty with the U.S. Navy during World War II, he returned to United Press in Washington.

He has covered news events in 25 countries since joining NBC News in London in 1952. As a watchdog over usage of the language, he is author of *Strictly Speaking: Will American be the Death of English?* and *A Civil Tongue*.
