Euphemisms 1965

One Captain Marryat, an English visitor to the United States in the 1830's, was taken by his hosts to see Niagara Falls. As the party, which included several young women, made its way up the rough approach to the Falls one of the young women fell. The captain gallantly rushed to her assistance, saying, "Oh! I hope you didn't hurt your leg." The girl haughtily refused Captain Marryat's help and left him wondering how he had offended, until one of the others took him aside to explain that in polite society the extremities were never called legs but were called "limbs". In a journal which he kept of his trip Captain Marryat recalled that he afterward heard references, even, to the "limbs" of a table and the "limbs" of a piano. He even claimed to have seen a piano whose legs were dressed "in modest little trousers with frills at the bottom of them." These, I hope, are only examples of a condescending Britisher pulling the "limb" of his American cousin.

This story is told, not to poke fun at the prudery of the Nineteenth Century, but to call attention to characteristics of American speech which are still prevalent today - the euphemism, the genteelism, and inflated language.

By euphemism I mean the substitution of an inoffensive word or phrase for a word or phrase which may in some way be thought to give offense. Genteelism is defined in Fowler's English Usage as "the substituting for the ordinary, natural word that first suggests itself, a synonym thought to be less soiled by the lips of the herd."

Inflated language is the name I choose to give to words and expressions used to puff up the status of the user.

The burden of this paper is the harm done to sensible speech and writing by careless use of words in inflated, genteel, and euphemistic manner.

The basic causes of the use of euphemisms perhaps go back into pre-history. Primitive societies seem always to have placed great weight on the literal meanings of words. Primitive man did not dare to say, "Well I'll be damned." or "If I'm not telling the truth, may lightning strike me dead." He feared that the very voicing of the words might call down damnation on his head or a bolt of lightning from the blue.

The Bible contains many examples of such respect for the spoken word. The Israelite would seldom call on his god by name. Although countless youths have been threatened with direful consequences for swearing it is likely that the Commaddment actually had reference to this fear of the literal use of the divine name. It was thought better not to speak the divine name at all unless the speaker was really prepared by an answer. The title "Lord", a euphemism if you please, was substituted for general use.

Similar taboos applied to speaking the names of evil spirits and of the dead.

As late as New Testament times the Bible records preoccupation with the physical power of words. The Gospel According to St. John, the most mystical of the gospels, begins with the sentence, "In the beginning was the Word." and goes on to elaborate on this concept

which equates the mystical "word" with creation and which has made an endless field for theologians to plow ever since.

That modern man has not lost his fear of words is shown by the common reluctance to speak the name of some evil or unfortunate circumstance which it is hoped can be avoided; "I hear that China has dropped an H bomb." "Don't say it! Maybe it isn't so". is a common response.

On a more practical level euphemisms often arise from a desire to mitigate the connotations of words. When defining a word it is not enough to give merely the literal meaning; the connotations or associations the word suggests must be considered. A thesaurus would probably list "proud" and "haughty" as synonyms; yet the connotation of proud is generally favorable, while the connotation of haughty is generally unfavorable.

When the euphemism is used in this way, common sense as well as common courtesy and tact can show many instances where feelings have been spared. Thus tosoften the harshness of the idea, the word "underprivileged" came to replace the word "poor". But the further history of this expression shows the danger to clear thinking and writing which lies in this practice. Today "underprivileged" has been replaced with "disadvantaged". The simple one-syllable word "poor" is never used. To compound the problem the word "underprivileged" almost always is used with qualifying adverbs. Thus we have culturally disadvantaged, socially disadvantaged, and intellectually disadvantaged, instead of, respectively, ill-bred, ill-mannered,

and stupid.

Although the motive giving rise to the euphemism was charitable the result has beнn almost to eliminate useful words from the language and replace them with pompous circumloqutions.

The genteelism has even less to recommend it than the euphemism since it is derived, not from concern for the feelings of others, but from a desire to inflate the users importance. Fowler's scornful description is well deserved. One who is truly genteel always assists another, never helps; always inquires, nevers asks; always perspires, never sweats. It is not necessary to add examples,; and it should be obvious that the objection is not to the words which are used but to the way in which they are substituted for the natural word.

The third characteristic of speech which I have called inflated language is closely akin to the euphemism and genteelism,both. The most inflated word in use today is, perhaps, the word "engineer". Janitors are now custodial engineers; streetsweepers are sanitation engineers; men who treat buildirg s for termites are extermination engineers. With very little thought the list could be considerably lengthened. The word has also been turned into the verb "to engineer" and is used in the sense of guiding or influencing.

In the same way great harm has been done to the word "profession". We have long had professional athletes and professional trumpet players, and now we have professional barbers and professional beauticians. (Professional beautician alone is an expression worth the attention of an entire paper.) Many writers who should know better now describe any trade requiring special skill as a profession.

If engineer is the lower class inflation the middle class is certainly "philosophy." Everyone has a philosophy these days. The X Company has a philosophy of doing business, not a set of policies or principles. The X College says in its catalog that it has a philosophy of well rounded education.

The middle class American in love with titles. Anyone who tries to discuss this phenomenon must risk comparison with Mencken in the "American Language" but consideration of inflated language would not be complete without making the attempt. Perhaps because we have no hereditary titles we take especial please in bestowing entirely undeserved and unnecessary ones on ourselves. The most common title is doctor. In England, doctor is used only by a PhD or by an MD in generalpractice. Surgeons there are not generally called doctors. In the United States we cheerfully bestow the title of doctor on chiropractors and even on druggists. Most clergymen do not find it too difficult to find some institution which will confer on them the title of doctor of divinity. Military and political titles are also in demand. Usually some military service is a requirement for all military titles except colonel. Any auctioneer is entitled to be called colonel simply for thetrouble of having the sign painter paint it on his door.

A politician, once elected to office, may use senator or governor or sheriff ever afterwards. There is reason to believe that actual election may not be necessary. I am told that the New York City telephone directory lists over fifty senators. Even disregarding the fact that one of their present senators is from Massachussetts it hardly seems possible that this many ex-senators

could live in one place. And finally, it is a poor lawyer indeed who cannot find one client who will bestow on him the title of judge.

One other area that is fertile ground for genteel and inflated language is that of man's humble bodily functions. The truly genteel use the word abdomen, thinking they are bettering the use of stomach, which except in a medical sense, is a euphemism for belly. It is indeed strange that a society which encourages the use of abdomen over belly would tolerate the tasteless advertising of bromides, laxatives, kidney stimulants, pile treatments, nd deodorants which we see and hear form every source.

Yet amidst all the gloom there is sometimes a ray of hope; ten year old boys still sing:

> Toreador-o, don't spit on the floor-o,
> Use the cuspidor-o,

which would not be possible if cuspidor had not been substituted for spitoon.

The unpleasant subject of death has spawned more loose expressions than any other, I suppose. Undertakers, an admittedly gruesome word, became funeral directors, a sensible expression, but this was not elegant enough for them so most have now become morticians. In like manner, cemetaries are now memorial gardens and lots are sold on a pre-need basis. Coffins long ago became caskets. I suppose many English studenst have wondered what Portia was doing with three caskets in her house, not knowing that a casket more correctly is a small jewelry box.

Everyone is familiar with the situation regarding the verb "to die". The expression "pass away" is the most common euphemism.

The colored people have shortened it to "pass". One researcher has listed more than fifty others, some of the most unusual of which are, "the golden cord is severed", "his clock has run down", "her frail tabernacle drifted away", and "at five o'clock in the morning she plumed the wings of her soul and took her flight to glory." This researcher concluded, "One of mankinds gravest problems is to avoid any straightforward mention of death or burial."

The purpose of this paper, however, is not to amuse, nor to poke fun at those who use the expressions mentioned. It is a serious matter that the American who so prides himself and is universally thought always to call a spade a spade, makes every effort not to do so, particularly in formal speech and writing. The man in the street is not the only violator; critics, authors, public figures, and others who should know better have been equally guilty. The point is that English, a vigorous, direct, language of great beauty is turned into a flaccid mass of circumloqutions. Henry Fowler puts it thus, "It need hardly be said that shortness is a merit in words; there are often reasons why shortness is not possible; much less often there are ocassions where length, not shortness is desirable; but it is a general truth that the short words are not only handier to use but more powerful in effect; extra syllables reduce, not increas vigor.

Language must be a living thing; new words will be born; outdated ones will die. There is a place for euphemisms, and perhaps even for genteelisms; but their place is certainly not in the sppech

or writing of those who are simply trying to impress the hearer with erudition or delicacy. Such usage shows lack of civilization. Good writing and persuasive speech owe their merit chiefly to little words, to light touches, to simple graces. They reside with those who will strive to have an unforced, unaffected way with language.

Richard C. Brasher

November 4, 1965