

A MODERN TOWER OF BABEL

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PAPER PREPARED FOR THE ATHENAEUM SOCIETY, HOPKINSVILLE, KENTUCKY. MARCH 5, 1981

Cadiz Rotary Club 9/15/81

THERE WAS A TIME, ACCORDING TO THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER OF THE BOOK OF GENESIS , WHEN "THE WHOLE EARTH WAS OF ONE LANGUAGE." IT WAS THEN THAT MEN DECIDED TO BUILD A CITY AND IN THAT CITY A TOWER THAT MIGHT "REACH UNTO HEAVEN." DISPLEASED WITH THIS EFFORT, JEHOVAH DETERMINED TO PREVENT IT, AND CHOSE TO DO SO BY THE SIMPLE EXPEDIENT OF "CONFOUNDING THEIR LANGUAGE," SO THEY COULD NO LONGER "UNDERSTAND ONE ANOTHER'S SPEECH." THUS, IN CONFUSION, THE PROJECT WAS ABANDONED AND THE MEN SCATTERED ABROAD.

THE GREAT LESSON OF THIS STORY IS SIMPLE BUT PROFOUND: WHEN UNABLE TO COMMUNICATE WITH EACH OTHER, ^{people} MEN CANNOT WORK TOGETHER TO SUCCEED IN LARGE AND COMPLEX PROJECTS. UNLESS AMERICANS TAKE THIS LESSON TO HEART, WE MAY BE IN GRAVE DANGER, BECAUSE COMMUNICATION IS BECOMING INCREASINGLY DIFFICULT.

I AM NOT TALKING ABOUT THE PROBLEMS OF BILINGUALISM THAT EXIST IN PARTS OF THE COUNTRY, GIVING RISE TO THE PROPOSAL THAT THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS TEACH BOTH IN SPANISH AS WELL AS ENGLISH IN SOME DISTRICTS, NOR AM I REFERRING TO THE SLIGHT DIFFERENCES YOU DETECT WHEN TRAVELING FROM NORTH TO SOUTH OR EAST TO WEST IN THIS COUNTRY. I REFER TO A MORE DECADENT PROCESS, WHEREBY THE ART OF PLAIN, DIRECT COMMUNICATION IS GIVING WAY TO "POP PHRASES," "IN WORDS", AND VARIOUS FORMS OF OBFUSCATION. AS THE TECHNOLOGY FOR COMMUNICATION IMPROVES, AND AS THE MASS MEDIA APPETITE FOR SPREADING BOTH FACT AND OPINION GROWS, THE NEED TO TALK WITHOUT COMMUNICATING ANYTHING PRECISE SEEMS TO INCREASE. FOR SHEER DESECRATION OF PLAIN ENGLISH I DARESAY THAT NO ONE CAN MATCH THE GOVERNMENT. ONE OF ITS CHIEF OFFENSES, TURNING NOUNS INTO VERBS, HAS GIVEN US SUCH

TERMS AS PRIORITIZE, EVENTUATE, OPERATIONALIZE, ~~EVENTUATE~~, AND PROBABLY THE MOST OVER-USED OF ALL, IMPACTING -- ALL WORDS THAT GRATE ON THE SENSITIVE EAR LIKE FINGERNAILS RAKED ACROSS A BLACK-BOARD.

EDWIN NEWMAN, PERHAPS THE NATION'S MOST BRILLIANT COMMENTATOR ON THIS SUBJECT, BELIEVES THAT MUCH OF GOVERNMENT'S FAILURES CAN BE TRACED TO ITS INABILITY TO EXPRESS IDEAS SIMPLY, BUT I THINK THAT BUREAUCRATIC COMMUNICATION IS MORE A SYMPTOM THAN A CAUSE OF THE GOVERNMENT'S INEPTNESS.

TO UNDERSTAND GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS AT ALL, ONE MUST KNOW CERTAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF BUREAUCRATIC LANGUAGE. IN THE FIRST PLACE IT IS NOT MEANT TO CONVEY DEFINITE IDEAS. THAT TRAIT IT SHARES WITH INFANTILE BABBLING, SCHIZOPHRENIC NEOLOGISMS, AND MUMBLING, NEITHER OF WHICH ARE MEANT TO COMMUNICATE ANYTHING IN PARTICULAR. INDEED, VERBAL CONCEPTS WITH CLEAR MEANINGS ARE DELIBERATELY CHANGED SO AS TO TAKE FROM THEM THE FINE EDGE OF CLARITY THEY POSSESS. FOR EXAMPLE, A CERTAIN COMPANY MAY BE SAID TO BE IN A BANKRUPTCY SITUATION. THIS IS NOT AS PRECISE AS SAYING THAT THE COMPANY IS BANKRUPT OR EVEN ON THE VERGE OF BANKRUPTCY. THE BEAUTY OF A TERM LIKE "BANKRUPTCY SITUATION" IS THAT IT DOES NOT TIE THE USER TO ANY SPECIFIC MEANING.

~~REDACTED~~ IT IS AS THOUGH A SURGEON MIGHT DESCRIBE SOMEONE AS BEING IN AN "APPENDICITIS SITUATION." IF THAT HAPPENED TO ONE OF YOUR RELATIVES, WOULD YOU SIGN THE PERMISSION FOR SURGERY? YOU PROBABLY WOULD NOT UNTIL YOU FOUND OUT WHETHER OR NOT "APPENDICITIS SITUATION" MEANT THAT THE PERSON HAD APPENDICITIS.

ALL OF US KNOW WHAT IS MEANT BY TERMS LIKE "YESTERDAY," "LAST JUNE 23RD," AND "DURING WORLD WAR II." THESE PHRASES HAVE DEFINITE MEANINGS. BUT WHAT, PRAY TELL, IS A POINT IN TIME? IS IT A DAY, A MOMENT, OR SOMETHING THAT SUGGESTS BUT DOES NOT PRECISELY DENOTE WHEN SOMETHING TOOK PLACE?

A POINT IN TIME IS A GOOD WAY TO PEG AN EVENT THAT MAY NOT EVEN HAVE OCCURRED AT ALL AND YET MIGHT OCCUR, ESPECIALLY IF IT'S AN ABSTRACT EVENT LIKE CHANGING ONE'S MIND OR FINDING SOMETHING OUT. JOHN DEAN, OF WATERGATE FAME, REMEMBERED A NUMBER OF THINGS THAT TOOK PLACE AT VARIOUS POINTS IN TIME, AS DID OTHER WATERGATE FIGURES. THIS PHRASE IS HANDY FOR TESTIFYING BEFORE SENATE COMMITTEES, BECAUSE, WHILE IT MAKES ONE SEEM COOPERATIVE, IT IS HARD TO PROVE PERJURY WHEN ONE SAYS NOTHING MORE DEFINITE. (NOTICE I SAID DEFINITE, NOT DEFINITIVE, WHICH IS A REDUNDANCY LIKE SAYING IRREGARDLESS FOR REGARDLESS OR SIMPLISTIC FOR SIMPLE, WHICH IS QUITE POPULAR THESE DAYS.)

OR BETTER YET, WHAT IS A TIME FRAME? A WEEK, A MONTH, OR AN ERA? OF COURSE, IT IS NEITHER OF THESE, AND YET IT COULD BE EITHER. IT IS A CHRONOLOGICAL CONSTRUCT WITH NO DEFINITE BOUNDARIES, NO DAY THAT CAN BE FIXED ON THE CALENDAR NOR HOUR THAT CAN BE FIXED ON THE CLOCK. IT IS USED TO BLUR, NOT TO CLARIFY THE ISSUE OF TIME, WHICH IS ACTUALLY A WONDERFULLY MEASURABLE ENTITY.

WHEN ONE PRIORITIZES A SET OF EVENTS OR IDEAS, WHAT DOES HE ACTUALLY DO WITH THEM? PUT THEM IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER OR IN THE ORDER OF THEIR IMPORTANCE (PERHAPS). PRIORITIZING CAN MEAN ANY OF SEVERAL THINGS, BUT IT IS DIFFICULT EVER TO KNOW WHICH, BECAUSE THE ACT OF PRIORITIZING RARELY TAKES PLACE--IT IS SOMETHING THAT ONE IS ALWAYS GOING TO DO AS PART OF A LONG-RANGE PLAN, OR THAT SOMEONE ELSE IS SUPPOSED TO DO AT "SOME POINT IN FUTURE TIME." ONE RARELY GETS TO SEE AN ACTUAL PRIORITIZING TAKE PLACE. LIKE GOING TO HEAVEN, IT IS HELD UP AS AN IDEAL TO BE ACCOMPLISHED BUT NOT SOMETHING THAT ONE WOULD ACTUALLY TAKE DEFINITE STEPS TO DO TONIGHT.

AND HOW DOES ONE OPTIMIZE SOMETHING? IMPROVE ON IT? USE IT MORE EFFECTIVELY? IT'S UP TO THE LISTENER OR READER TO GUESS. AND WHEN DOES SOMETHING BECOME EFFECTUATED? THAT ALL DEPENDS ON WHAT IS BEING EFFECTUATED, FOR THE WORD ONLY REFERS OBLIQUELY TO SOME ACTUAL EVENT.

THE OTHER CHARACTERISTIC OF BUREAUCRATIC LANGUAGE, ITS TENDENCY TO SELF-JUSTIFICATION BY GRANDIOSE TERMS, IS ILLUSTRATED BY A MEMORANDUM FROM A GOVERNMENT DIVISION HEAD, WHO DESCRIBED HIS REASONS FOR SWITCHING HIS OFFICE FROM ONE ROOM TO ANOTHER. THE NEW OFFICE WAS DOWN THE HALL ABOUT 25 FEET AND ABOUT TWICE AS BIG AS THE OLD OFFICE. HE SAID HE MOVED "IN ORDER TO MAXIMIZE ACCESSIBILITY IN THE BEST INTERESTS OF THE CITIZENS OF THE COMMONWEALTH." THIS EGOCENTRIC MAN MERELY WANTED THE PRESTIGE OF A BIGGER OFFICE, BUT HE MADE IT SOUND AS THOUGH HE WAS LAYING DOWN HIS LIFE FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE PEOPLE.

CLOSELY ALLIED TO BUREAUCRATIC LANGUAGE IS THE JARGON OF PROFESSIONAL PLANNERS. THEY SOMETIMES WORK FOR THE GOVERNMENT OR FOR QUASI-GOVERNMENT AGENCIES, BUT OFTEN FOR PRIVATE BUSINESS. THEY HAVE A MARVELOUS LANGUAGE OF THEIR OWN WHICH RECONSTRUCTS REALITY AND REDUCES THE ART OF THINKING TO A SET OF MEANINGLESS PHRASES, NEATLY ARRANGED IN SUCH A WAY AS TO SUGGEST SOMETHING CONSTRUCTIVE.

PLANNERS ALWAYS BEGIN WITH A STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM, BUT NEVER THE ONE YOU WOULD EXPECT THEM TO ATTACK. FOR EXAMPLE, YOU MIGHT THINK THAT HEAVY TRAFFIC DURING RUSH HOUR IS A PROBLEM THAT MOST BIG CITIES HAVE, BUT A PLANNER PREFERRED TO WORK ON THE "BI-MODAL DISTRIBUTION OF THE FREQUENCY OF INCREMENTS IN VEHICULAR MOVEMENT IN HIGH DENSITY POPULATION AREAS." IN SIMPLE TERMS, THIS MEANS THAT THE STREETS ARE MORE CROWDED WHEN PEOPLE ARE GOING TO WORK IN THE MORNINGS AND AGAIN WHEN THEY RETURN HOME IN THE EVENINGS. TO A PLANNER, A CITY IS ALWAYS A "HIGH DENSITY POPULATION AREA."

AFTER THE PLANNER STATES THE PROBLEM, HE THEN ASKS HIS CLIENTS TO NAME THE IDEAL SITUATION, I.E., HOW THEY WOULD LIKE THINGS TO BE. YOU WILL NOTE THAT THE PLANNER GETS MOST OF HIS INFORMATION FROM THE CLIENTS WITH WHOM HE CONSULTS. THE NAIVE FREQUENTLY THINK THAT THE PLANNER'S NEXT STEP WILL BE TO TELL THEM HOW TO GET FROM A TO B, BUT NOT SO. NEXT, HE EXTRACTS FROM HIS GROUP SOMETHING CALLED OBJECTIVES, WHICH ARE NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH GOALS, BEING SHORT-RANGE IMPROVEMENTS THAT ARE DESIRABLE IF RELATIVELY INCONSEQUENTIAL. SOME OBJECTIVES ARE EASILY

ATTAINABLE, BUT OTHERS ARE AS ELUSIVE AS A SPIRIT. THE NEXT STEP IS TO LIST ACTION STEPS OR METHODS, AND IF ANYONE STAYS INTERESTED IN THE PROJECT LONG ENOUGH, THE NEXT STEP WILL BE TO IDENTIFY BARRIERS TO THE ACTION STEPS. NEXT COME ACTION STEPS TO ELIMINATE THOSE BARRIERS, AND SO ON IT GOES. I AM NOT CERTAIN HOW FAR IT CAN GO, BECAUSE BY THIS TIME, EITHER THE ORIGINAL PROBLEM HAS DISAPPEARED OR BEEN FORGOTTEN, THE GROUP HAS DECIDED THAT IT IS EASIER TO LIVE WITH THE PROBLEM THAN WITH THE PLAN, OR THE PLANNER HAS CHANGED JOBS. AT ANY RATE, THE PROCESS ALWAYS FOUNDER, BECAUSE ITS PURPOSE IS NOT TO SOLVE PROBLEMS BUT TO EVOLVE PLANS, AND ONE CAN SUSTAIN INTEREST IN THAT FOR ONLY SO LONG.

HASTENING THE DEATH OF PLAIN ENGLISH IS NOT THE OFFENSE OF LOW LEVEL BUREAUCRATS ONLY. EVEN THOSE IN THE HIGHEST ECHELONS, INCLUDING THE WHITE HOUSE, ARE NOT GUILTLSS. A WISE MAN COULD HAVE FORETOLD THE DOWNFALL OF JIMMY CARTER AS EARLY AS MARCH 23, 1977, BARELY TWO MONTHS AFTER HIS INAUGURATION. IT WAS THEN THAT THE PRESIDENT ISSUED AN EXECUTIVE ORDER TO THE EFFECT THAT ALL GOVERNMENT REGULATIONS MUST BE "AS SIMPLE AND CLEAR AS POSSIBLE," THEY WERE TO BE, IN HIS WORDS, "IN PLAIN ENGLISH."

BUT LISTEN TO THE WAY THAT EXECUTIVE ORDER WAS WORDED:
"THE FOLLOWING REQUIREMENTS SHALL GOVERN THE PREPARATION OF REGULATORY ANALYSES. (A) CRITERIA. AGENCY HEAD SHALL ESTABLISH CRITERIA FOR DETERMINING WHICH REGULATIONS REQUIRE REGULATORY

ANALYSES. THE CRITERIA ESTABLISHED SHALL (1) INSURE THAT REGULATORY ANALYSES ARE PERFORMED FOR ALL REGULATIONS WHICH WILL RESULT IN (A) AN ANNUAL AFFECT (SPELLED WITH AN A) ON THE ECONOMY OF 100 MILLION DOLLARS OR MORE . . . " NEED I GO FURTHER? ONE COULD HOPE, BACK IN 1977, THAT THE MAN ABOUT TO ATTACK THE NATION'S PROBLEMS HAD NOT ACTUALLY WRITTEN THAT EXECUTIVE ORDER ON PLAIN ENGLISH, BUT NOW ONE WONDERS.

I SINCERELY HOPE THAT PRESIDENT REAGAN'S DRAMA TRAINING HAS TAUGHT HIM THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATING WITH HIS AUDIENCE, THOUGH HIS BACKGROUND AS A SPORTS BROADCASTER IS AN EVIL OMEN. IT IS QUITE POSSIBLE THAT THE AVERAGE AMERICAN HAS NOT UNDERSTOOD A PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS SINCE HARRY S. TRUMAN. (WHEN HARRY SAID, "HE'S A DAMN LIAR," EVERYBODY KNEW WHAT HE MEANT.) SEVERAL PRESIDENTS HAVE TRIED TO COMMUNICATE PRIMARILY THROUGH PRESS SECRETARIES. THUS, RON ZEIGLER GAVE US THE INOPERANT STATEMENT AS A EUPHEMISM FOR OFFICIAL LYING, AND IT WAS ALSO ZEIGLER WHO SAID OF NIXON'S LAWYER, JAMES ST. CLAIR, THAT HE NEEDED TIME TO "EVALUATE AND MAKE A JUDGMENT IN TERMS OF A RESPONSE." JODY POWELL FOUND IT BETTER TO TALK OF A DECELERATION IN THE ECONOMIC RECOVERY VARIABLES THAN OF RECESSION.

ONE NICE THING ABOUT PRESIDENT NIXON'S SPEECH WRITERS WAS THAT THEY PLAYED FAIR. JUST BEFORE HAVING HIM UTTER A COMPLETELY BAFFLING REMARK, THEY ALWAYS SIGNALLED US BY HAVING HIM SAY, "LET ME MAKE THIS PERFECTLY CLEAR."

EVERY ADMINISTRATION HAS ITS BUZZ WORDS; DURING THE CARTER YEARS, EVERYTHING WAS COMPREHENSIVE. EVEN BEFORE TAKING OFFICE, MR. REAGAN'S FOLLOWERS HAD BEGUN TO USE A PARTICULARLY OFFENSIVE

PHRASE, DIALING BACK, WHICH APPARENTLY MEANS SOMETHING LIKE CHANGING ONE'S MIND OR REVISING A POLICY. COINING THIS TERM MAY BE THE MOST DISAPPOINTING THING THE REAGAN ADMINISTRATION HAS DONE SO FAR.

IN HIS SENATE CONFIRMATION HEARINGS, ALEXANDER HAIG WAS ASKED ABOUT THE POSSIBLE USE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN WAR, TO WHICH HE REPLIED THAT HE WOULD NOT "DEFINITIZE THAT SITUATION." LATER, WHEN ASKED HOW MANY GOOD WILL AMBASSADORS HE MIGHT APPOINT AS SECRETARY OF STATE, HE REPLIED THAT HE WOULD NOT WANT TO "STRADDLE THAT STATISTICAL FENCE." OBVIOUSLY, GENERAL HAIG DID NOT WANT TO ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS, BUT HE SHOULD HAVE JUST SAID SO HONESTLY. IT IS HARDLY FAIR TO BASTARDIZE THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE JUST TO AVOID HONEST, STRAIGHTFORWARD ANSWERS. THE NEW SECRETARY HAS BEEN HAILED AS A MAN OF GREAT ABILITY, BUT I WORRY ABOUT AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY IN HIS HANDS FOR THE NEXT FOUR YEARS UNLESS HE THINKS MORE CLEARLY THAN HE COMMUNICATES.

SENATE CONFIRMATION HEARINGS MUST BRING OUT THE WORST IN GOVERNMENT EXECUTIVES. THE NEW SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE STATED DURING ONE OF HIS IN EARLY JANUARY THAT THE AMERICAN FARMER NEEDED "PROFITABILITY." I SUSPECT THAT MOST FARMERS WOULD BE SATISFIED WITH JUST PLAIN PROFITS, BUT THE LATTER IS TOO PRECISE AND CLEAR A TERM FOR A SENATE HEARING. "PROFITABILITY" MAKES YOU THINK OPTIMISTICALLY OF PROFITS, BUT IT'S EASIER TO WEASEL OUT OF LATER IF THINGS DON'T GO WELL IN THE FARM INDUSTRY.

NO DISCUSSION OF GOVERNMENT LANGUAGE WOULD BE COMPLETE WITHOUT REFERENCE TO THE LANGUAGE OF GEORGE ORWELL'S BONE CHILLING NOVEL, 1984--A LANGUAGE KNOWN AS NEWSPEAK. IN POINT OF FACT,

ORWELL SEEMS TO ME TO HAVE ERRED IN HIS PROPHECY OF WHAT WOULD HAPPEN TO LANGUAGE UNDER A BIG BROTHER TYPE GOVERNMENT. WHILE SOME ASPECTS OF NEWSPEAK HAVE, INDEED, FOUND THEIR WAY INTO OUR LANGUAGE, THE MAIN CHARACTERISTIC, NAMELY, THE REDUCTION OF LANGUAGE TO FEWER, SIMPLER TERMS WITH PRECISE MEANINGS, DOES NOT SEEM CONSISTENT WITH WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO GOVERNMENT ENGLISH IN THE 30 YEARS SINCE ORWELL'S SOCIAL SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL APPEARED.

A LANGUAGE TRAIT THAT HAS GROWN IN USE IS THE NEWSPEAK TENDENCY TO MAKE COMPOUND WORDS BY COMBINING SIMPLE, ONE SYLLABLE WORDS. FOR EXAMPLE, TERMS LIKE GOODTHINK, SEXCRIME, AND SPEAK-RIGHT (WHICH COULD BE USED AS EITHER NOUNS OR ADJECTIVES AND HAD OBVIOUS MEANINGS) REMIND ONE OF SUCH AWKWARD COMBINATIONS AS SUPERGOOD AND SUPERCOOL WHICH HAVE INCREASED MARKEDLY IN RECENT USAGE, DESPITE THEIR SINGULAR UGLINESS, BOTH AS SOUNDS AND IN CONFIGURATIONS ON THE PRINTED PAGE.

BUT I STILL BELIEVE THAT AS BUREAUCRACY BECOMES MORE PERVASIVE, ITS WORDS BECOME LESS RATHER THAN MORE PRECISE. IT ALSO CONTINUES TO PROLIFERATE NEW WORDS (LIKE DEFINITIZE) THAT DO NOT ENHANCE THE BEAUTY OF LANGUAGE BUT DO KEEP IT IN A CONSTANT STATE OF FLUX THAT IS CONFUSING TO ANYONE WHO ATTEMPTS TO STRIVE FOR PRECISE COMMUNICATION BY MEANS OF TRADITIONAL GRAMMATIC FORMS.

CAN YOU IMAGINE SOME OF THE GREAT DOCUMENTS IF OUR FOUNDING FATHERS HAD HAD MODERN-DAY PRESIDENTIAL SPEECH WRITERS? TAKE THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, FOR EXAMPLE, A VERITABLE CLASSIC OF LINGUISTIC CLARITY: "WE HOLD THESE TRUTHS TO BE SELF-EVIDENT, THAT ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL AND ARE ENDOWED BY THEIR CREATOR WITH CERTAIN INALIENABLE RIGHTS TO LIFE, LIBERTY AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS."

IT MIGHT HAVE COME OUT SOMETHING LIKE THIS: "WE HOLD THESE SEVERAL POSTULATES TO BE TENABLE IN THIS TIME FRAME, THAT ALL PERSONS (NOT MEN, MIND YOU) ARE TO BE REGARDED AS HAVING EQUAL OPPORTUNITY REGARDLESS OF NATIONAL ORIGIN (INCLUDING HISPANIC AND AFRO-AMERICAN) OR HANDICAPPING CONDITION AND HAVE RECEIVED, THROUGH NATURAL SELECTION, THE FULL RANGE OF CIVIL RIGHTS, INCLUDING THE RIGHT TO VIABILITY, THE RIGHT TO CHOOSE A LIFE STYLE FROM A WIDE VARIETY OF OPTIONS, AND TO CARRY OUT ACTIONS CONSISTENT WITH THOSE OPTIONS."

BUT PERHAPS I AM PICKING ON THE GOVERNMENT TOO MUCH. CLARITY OF LANGUAGE IS BEING ATTACKED FROM ALL SIDES, THERE ARE THOSE WHO NEVER CHOOSE ANYTHING, THEY OPT FOR IT. ADVERTISERS AND PUBLIC RELATIONS MEN NEVER PUT OFF A DECISION, THEY PUT IT ON THE BACK BURNER. EDUCATORS DO NOT TEACH CHILDREN ANYMORE, THEY DEVELOP PROGRAMS TO MAXIMIZE THEIR ACADEMIC POTENTIALS. POLITICAL ADVISERS DO NOT DESCRIBE A POSSIBLE EVENT, THEY IMAGINE A SCENARIO. SPORTS BROADCASTERS DO NOT JUST SEE TEAMS AS PLAYING BADLY, BUT FIND THEM UNABLE TO GET UNTRACKED. (THE LOQUACIOUS HOWARD COSELL, APPARENTLY AFFLICTED BY A BAD CASE OF THE MULTI-SYLLABIC SYNDROME WOULD APPEAR TO BE THE CHAMPION OF SHEER

BANALITY.) PSYCHOLOGISTS REFUSE TO REWARD GOOD BEHAVIOR, THEY PREFER TO REINFORCE POSITIVELY INCREMENTAL MOVEMENTS TOWARD PRE-DETERMINED GOALS. LAWYERS DEIGN TO WRITE OF PEOPLE, BUT WAX ELOQUENTLY ABOUT THE PARTY OF THE FIRST PART, THE PARTY OF THE SECOND PART, ETC. IN A CONTRACT THAT WE RECEIVED FROM THE STATE OF KENTUCKY, IT WAS SUGGESTED THAT WE, THE PARTY OF THE SECOND PART, SHOULD AGREE TO PROVIDE FOR CERTAIN DISTURBED PATIENTS, "SERVICES MOST CONDUCTIVE TO THE RAPID, EFFECTIVE, AND EFFICIENT TREATMENT." PRIOR TO THAT IT HAD NOT OCCURRED TO US THAT WE MIGHT TRY TO PROVIDE EFFECTIVE AND EFFICIENT TREATMENT THAT WAS SLOW OR RAPID AND EFFECTIVE TREATMENT THAT WAS INEFFICIENT.

BUSINESSMEN DO NOT GET NERVOUS, THEY GET UP-TIGHT. ADOLESCENTS AREN'T SEEKING AN IDENTITY ANYMORE, THEY ARE TRYING TO GET THEIR HEADS TOGETHER. THE POLICE DO NOT ARREST ANYONE, THEY TAKE SUSPECTS INTO CUSTODY (WHICH SOUNDS A LITTLE LIKE GOING AWAY TO SUMMER CAMP). ANYONE WHO IS CONFUSED IS SAID NOT TO HAVE HIS HEAD SCREWED ON STRAIGHT. CHILDREN AREN'T PLACED IN CLASSROOMS BUT IN THE LEAST RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENTS. NEGOTIATORS DON'T CONTINUE TO TALK, THEY HAVE ONGOING DIALOGUE. AND THEIR OPPONENTS' VIEWS ARE NOT WRONG, THEY ARE COUNTERPRODUCTIVE.

ADVERTISERS ARE NO LONGER SATISFIED TO DESCRIBE THE PRODUCTS THEY TOUT AS GOOD, OR THE BEST MONEY CAN BUY; THEY FIND IT NECESSARY TO ASSAULT THEIR LISTENERS WITH PSEUDOSCIENTIFIC JARGON. THUS, A CERTAIN PRODUCT IS SAID TO BE "TECHNOLOGICALLY ADVANCED" AND MADE OF A "CHROMIUM COMPOUND." SMALL WONDER THAT SUCH A PRODUCT WOULD FINALLY BE DESCRIBED NOT AS A PLAIN OLD RAZOR BLADE, BUT AS "THE TRAC - II SHAVING SYSTEM."

SYSTEMS ARE BIG IN ADVERTISING, AS WELL AS WITH BRIGHT YOUNG BUREAUCRATS AND JUNIOR EXECUTIVES. WHEN YOU TALK GLIBLY OF SYSTEMS OR SYSTEMS THEORY, IT SOUNDS AS THOUGH YOU HAVE STUDIED SCIENCE AND MIGHT KNOW SOMETHING ABOUT THE MYSTERIES OF COMPUTERS. SO INSTEAD OF TRADING WITH A GROCERY STORE CHAIN, YOU MAY FIND YOURSELF DOING BUSINESS WITH A RETAIL FOOD DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM. THE OLD COUNTRY DOCTOR IS NOW A PRIMARY CARE PHYSICIAN IN A RURAL HEALTH DELIVERY SYSTEM.

THE TERM ESTABLISHMENT HAS BEEN EXALTED IN MUCH THE SAME WAY. WE DO NOT BELONG TO CHURCHES ANYMORE, WE ARE MEMBERS OF THE RELIGIOUS ESTABLISHMENT. A COLLEGE PROFESSOR IS PART OF THE EDUCATIONAL ESTABLISHMENT.

IS A SYSTEM OR AN ESTABLISHMENT REALLY BETTER THAN A PLAIN OLD HOSPITAL, OR CHURCH, OR GROCERY STORE? I THINK NOT, IF IT IS JUST MEDICAL TREATMENT, A WORSHIP SERVICE, OR FOOD YOU WANT, BUT OUR OVERBLOWN, COLLECTIVE EGOS, FED BY TELEVISION ADVERTISING AND POLITICAL SPEECHES, REQUIRE THESE INFLATED, OBTUSE TERMS, EVEN AT THE EXPENSE OF LOSING CLARITY AND UNDERSTANDING. NOTHING LESS WILL SELL.

SUCH TERMINOLOGY IS THROWN AROUND LIKE CONFETTI BY THE YOUNG AND THE OLD. BUT DOES ANYONE KNOW WHAT WE ARE TALKING ABOUT? SOMETIMES WE HAVE TO ADMIT THAT WE ARE LOST IN THIS MAZE OF FUZZY VERBAGE. THIS SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN WHAT HAPPENED TO THE CITY OF LOUISVILLE JUST RECENTLY. COURIER-JOURNAL COLUMNIST JOHN FILIATREAU TOLD OF HOW THE CITY OF LOUISVILLE HIRED A CONSULTANT, NAMED THE MANAGEMENT IMPROVEMENT CORPORATION OF AMERICA, ON RECOMMENDATION OF A NEW YORK CITY CONSULTANT. THE CORPORATION COMPLETED A

TEN-WEEK STUDY OF LOUISVILLE'S GARBAGE COLLECTION PROBLEMS, THEN CAME UP WITH A REPORT WHICH WAS FORWARDED TO THE FIRST CONSULTANT. HE, IN TURN, REDUCED IT TO AN "EXECUTIVE SUMMARY" WHICH RECOMMENDED THAT THE CITY ADOPT SOME OF THE SECOND CONSULTANT'S 14 RECOMMENDATIONS, WHICH INCLUDED SUCH BRILLIANT IDEAS AS CUTTING THE EXPENSES BY REDUCING THE NUMBER OF COLLECTIONS FROM TWO TO ONE PER WEEK.

THE INTERESTING PART IS THAT THE CITY HIRED A CONSULTANT TO RECOMMEND A CONSULTANT, AND WHEN THAT CONSULTANT FINISHED CONSULTING, THE RESULTING DOCUMENT WAS FORWARDED TO THE FIRST CONSULTANT, WHO CONSULTED WITH THE OTHER CONSULTANT'S REPORT, THEN REDUCED IT TO AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY BEFORE CONSULTING WITH CITY OFFICIALS. DOES THE CITY OF LOUISVILLE HAVE NO ONE WHO CAN READ AN 87-PAGE DOCUMENT WITHOUT CONSULTING A CONSULTANT FOR A SUMMARY? FILIATRO SUGGESTS THAT A GIANT STEP TOWARD SOLVING SOLID WASTE DISPOSAL PROBLEMS IN LOUISVILLE WOULD BE TAKEN BY TOSSING MOST OF ITS CONSULTANTS ON THE GARBAGE PILE!

LET ME REFER YOU TO ONE LAST SOURCE OF DISTORTED ENGLISH. IF I WERE TO USE SUCH PHRASES AS "GETTEN OVER LIKE A FAT RAT IN A CHEESE FACTORY . . . HIGHER THAN NINE KITES ON A BREEZY DAY . . . (OR) LAY OUT TIL YOU GET WIRED UP," WOULD YOU KNOW WHAT I WAS TALKING ABOUT? IF SO, THEN YOU MUST KNOW SOMETHING ABOUT EBONICS, A NEW WORD FOR THE LANGUAGE OF BLACK AMERICANS. IN A TEXTBOOK WRITTEN BY A BLACK PSYCHOLOGIST IT IS DEFINED AS "THE LINGUISTIC AND PARALINGUISTIC FEATURES WHICH ON A CONCENTRIC CONTINUUM REPRESENTS THE COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE OF THE WEST AFRICAN, CARIBBEAN, AND UNITED STATES SLAVE DESCENDANT OF AFRICAN ORIGIN." THE WRITER FOUND IT NECESSARY TO FOOTNOTE THAT DEFINITION IN ORDER TO FURTHER

DEFINE CONCENTRIC CONTINUUM, WHICH HE SAYS, "DESCRIBES THE EXPANSE OF BLACK LANGUAGE AND ITS CONTINUOUSLY OVERLAPPING DEVELOPMENTS AS A FUNCTION OF THE INFLUENCES BY WHICH IT HAS BEEN AFFECTED."

OBVIOUSLY THAT DEFINITION IS NOT WRITTEN IN EBONICS, BUT IN A FORM OF PROFESSORIAL ENGLISH, DESIGNED TO MAKE TRIVIAL SUBJECT MATTER SEEM IMPORTANT ENOUGH TO JUSTIFY ACADEMIC PROMOTION. THE DANGER OF THE WHOLE THING IS THAT IT ENCOURAGES THE IDEA THAT THE LANGUAGE SPOKEN ON THE STREETS SHOULD BECOME THE LANGUAGE SPOKEN IN THE CLASSROOM, THAT THE TEACHER SHOULD NOT EXPECT THE STUDENT TO LEARN FLUENT ENGLISH BUT SHOULD, RATHER, LEARN TO UNDERSTAND THE STUDENTS' STREET LANGUAGE AND GRADE HIM ON HIS MASTERY OF IT.

SO IT IS NO WONDER THAT THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE TOWER OF BABEL FOUNDERED WHEN LANGUAGE WAS CONFOUNDED. I HAVE IT ON GOOD AUTHORITY THAT WHEN THOSE ANCIENT MEN LABORED ON THE PLAINS OF SHINAR SOME FIVE THOUSAND YEARS AGO, THAT IT WAS NOT FOREIGN LANGUAGES THAT SUDDENLY CONFUSED THEM. WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED IS THAT A CARPENTER STOOD UP ONE DAY AND EXPRESSED A NEED "TO REDEFINE AND RESTRUCTURE THE COROLLARY MECHANISMS." A BRICK MASON THEN TURNED AND ANSWERED HIM, "LIKE MAN, I DON'T KNOW WHERE YOU'RE COMING FROM," AT WHICH POINT THEIR CO-WORKERS DECIDED THE PROJECT WAS IMPOSSIBLE, SO THEY PACKED UP AND WANDERED AWAY.

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