

Behind the Words

Behind the Words:
The FCO, Hegemonolingualism
and the End of Britain's Freedom

By

William Mallinson

**CAMBRIDGE
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P U B L I S H I N G

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To my immediate families, namely my parents David and Tina, my wife Kalypso, and our children Alice and David. When I am gone, and even before, I hope that my British-Greek children will enjoy this book. Long live Scrabble!

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FOREWORD

Unaccustomed to writing forewords, I wanted to find out how I should go about it. Of course I went straight to Wikipedia for a definition, instead of reaching for one of the numerous dictionaries which adorn my shelves, something I would have done in the not too distant past, even after having purchased my first laptop. “A foreword”, Wikipedia informed me, “is a (usually short) piece of writing sometimes placed at the beginning of a book or other piece of literature.” Well, I thought, that shouldn’t be too difficult. I spent a few more minutes in front of the screen in an effort to find something less vague which could point me in the right direction and I came across a website in which a foreword was described as a “marketing tool”. The “target audience”, meaning the readers I suppose, was also cited in most descriptions as being of paramount importance when writing a foreword. Well, quite frankly, the “target audience” in this case is anyone who speaks English or has any interest at all in the language and its usage or, for that matter, the use of language in general. So, presumably all I had to do now was write some very positive things about the author, extol his writing ability and describe how brilliantly this latest book was written in his typically clear, incisive, thought-provoking and original style. Phew! I think that’s enough adjectives for now. At this point, lest I be called flippant, unconventional or worse, I shall turn to the book’s content and attempt to introduce some structure into this foreword.

As the title might suggest, this book considers the way in which Standard English has been, and continues to be, eroded and how this tendency has influenced writing within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), long-considered a bastion of correct usage when it comes to the written word. This, the book goes on to explain, has led to a corresponding fall in standards of diplomacy which has in turn had a negative influence on Britain’s rôle in the world. An indication of the relevance of this subject is given by a recent article in *The Economist*, which describes the Foreign Office as being a place where policy work and language skills were once highlighted but where now one is judged on “strategic awareness” and an ability to “communicate and influence”. I do not need to go into the prevalence of management fads across all walks of professional life in order to illustrate my point, as I think my “target audience” has probably got the picture!

The first chapter looks at how the term “globalisation” and all the catchwords it has spawned is neither new nor a phenomenon, as the author points out that it all started when Magellan circumnavigated the globe. The author then deftly ties this in with the dumbing down of education and the ever-increasing number of universities in Britain and the subsequent transformation of “students” into “customers”. In short, as the author says, education has become “a measurable and expandable business”.

Moving on to chapters two and three, we find an illuminating description of a training course on writing skills at the FCO from the seventies. This is sharply contrasted with the effects that information technology and socio-political changes have had on the FCO and the way it functions. The author’s point that all the jargon and management speak serves ultimately to obfuscate and not to clarify is rather well put.

In chapter four the author gets down to the nitty-gritty with some well-chosen examples of country reviews written by the FCO in 1980, 2005 and 2006. I shall not go into detail here; suffice it to say that the change in style, analysis and presentation of the documents in question makes for interesting and quite surprising reading.

Chapter five predicts the death of Standard English, the latter having become a mere dialect, in a make-believe article from the year 2080. The author then tears apart the concept that Standard English is all tied up with the notion of class. The final chapter illustrates the way in which Britain’s freedom, not least via an increasing reliance on the US in terms of security, defence and foreign policy, has been compromised. The author concludes that perhaps it’s time to slow down and take stock.

Now that I have briefly dealt with the content of this book let us turn to some of the issues and questions it raises. The expression “to go with the flow” sprang to mind while I was reading the first chapter, an expression I remember being referred to in a novel as “an invertebrate philosophy”. Let us consider the influx, or should I say flood, of jargon, buzzwords, neologisms and other often incomprehensible and unnecessary terms into the English language as a facet of this philosophy. English is indeed flexible, as the author states at one point in the book, to an extent that many other languages are not. This very flexibility is of course a double-edged sword, and any attempt to officially regulate the language in the way, for example, that the *Académie française* does in France would probably be met with derision, suspicion or both. However, that is not to say that a little vigilance would not go amiss, be it at an official level (who cannot say that they are tired of hearing politicians saying “going forward”?) or at an individual level.

This book points to a link between the erosion of Britain's independence in terms of security, defence and foreign policy which, the author claims, has been brought about in part, or is part and parcel of, a steady decline in the use of English in its standard form and the increasing use of business-inspired terminology and jargon, coming mainly from the US. The author puts forward a very convincing case, complete with concrete examples. In the introduction there is a reference to the power of political linguistics as being undervalued and that the influence of language on relations between states is thus little understood. This observation, perhaps more than any other, puts this book into context, for the real subject, behind the words, is of course linguistic manipulation, be it in political rhetoric, advertising, marketing or just good old fashioned propaganda. You have been warned!

Adrian Mallinson

Business English coach and translator

Paris, July 2014

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Two recently retired Knights of the Realm, both former ambassadors, were simply too modest to wish to be mentioned. Another former ambassador, equally modest, did however agree to be acknowledged publicly. He is Patrick Morgan, one of the most solid Celts of the Office, with whom I had the pleasure to work in United Nations Department. When I recently met him after many years, then became now. His incisive and thoughtful comments have proved to be invaluable. I also thank Graham Holland, the FCO information rights man, for his gargantuan efforts in trying to locate some documents and for allowing me to have copies of them. I thank Robin Cosby for some pertinent textual tweaking, and Zoran Ristic for some vital help with the computer. Finally, I thank Jeremy Paxman for his reply to my letter.

PROLOGUE

Apart from writing for one's own edification, there is often an audience to consider, in this case those among you who may be worried about the decline of Standard English, and Britain's concomitant and increasing loss of independence, not only to Brussels, but to Washington. As I mention below, Bismarck said that the most significant event of the twentieth century would be the fact that the North Americans spoke English. But no one has yet said that the most significant event of the twenty first-century is the fact that the English speak North American. Or at least they are beginning to, with increasing speed. Just to give the reader some flavour of how I presented my idea to Jeremy Paxman, I reproduce below my letter to him and his reply, which stimulated me to further efforts.

DYING ENGLISH

Dear Jeremy Paxman,

It is possible that you might have vaguely come across my name, as Susannah Stevens of BBC News recently interviewed me about Greece, posting the results on to BBC World. I asked her how to get in touch with you, hence this letter.

*As a lecturer at the Ionian (Greek State) University, teaching British history, literature and culture, every year I order one hundred of your books, *The English*, for my students. As a wild river trout fan, I have also read your fly-fishing book. You will see from the enclosed leaflet that I am a diplomatic historian, concentrating on Anglo-Greek relations and Cyprus. I have now, as a former member of HM Diplomatic Service, decided to write a book juxtaposing the internal written language of the FCO in the late Seventies with that of today. Clearly, it has been adversely affected, inter alia, by electrification, political correctness, Americanisation and globalisation.*

As you can see from the attached correspondence with the FCO, there is an element of Orwellian, 'Yes, Minister' farce in my attempts to obtain contemporary material, even if topped and tailed and unclassified. However, it looks as if I may shortly obtain sufficient material (apparently, diplomatic despatches no longer exist!) to enable me to write about how

and why even FCO English may have become as linguistically bulimic as that of many politicians, although I have yet to see the contemporary material. Perhaps the BBC has also been affected.

The purpose of my letter is to ask whether you might enjoy contributing to (not financially!), participating in and/or commenting on the book, perhaps within the context of BBC English, juxtaposing that of the Seventies with what now exists. I suspect you may hold some healthy and robust views. Clearly, your views could influence what I write.

I shall be in Chiswick from 2 to 18 August. On the serendipitous off chance that you are able to meet, I would very much appreciate it. Otherwise, I hope to hear from you in September at the above address. I have written to your above address, because I have no e-mail address or telephone number. At any rate, I do hope you can spare a few moments to improve my ideas, and help on what I think could be a worthwhile book.

Yours sincerely,

Bill Mallinson

Dr. William Mallinson

PS I also enclose my poem about a trout.

The incisive and intrepid journalist, interviewer and author kindly replied to me within a month, as follows:

Dear Dr Mallinson,

Thank you for your letter about your interesting book.

I'm afraid, though, that I shall have to give a disappointing answer. I am completely confident that BBC English has changed very much since the 1970's. But I fear that I have almost certainly been corrupted by the change. I'm not even sure that I could attempt a pastiche with any confidence!

Good luck with it.

Jeremy Paxman

Feeling simultaneously chuffed (a busy man had taken the trouble to reply) and slightly disappointed (no comment on my poem about a wild river trout)¹, I nevertheless felt a hidden force spurring me onwards, while thinking of Robert the Bruce watching a spider. Whether I was picturing myself as Robert the Bruce or as the spider is a moot point, but I found Paxman's answer so frank, that I decided to plough on. And here we are.

¹ The poem is at appendix C.

INTRODUCTION

“If language is not correct, then what is said is not what is meant; if what is said is not what is meant, then what ought to be done remains undone.”¹ Whether or not Confucius said or wrote this may be a moot point, but the meaning is as clear as a bell: to preserve and protect a language, precision is important, whether it be literary, poetic or plain business language. Even styles such as “stream of consciousness” depend on precision, by their very apparent antithesis to it, as a quick reading of some of James Joyce’s writings will make clear.

I shall make no bones about it: this is a book about the disintegration of Standard English within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (henceforth FCO) and, concomitantly, standards of diplomacy and Britain’s rôle in the world. The question has to be posed: is post-imperial *rigor mortis* affecting the way in which we write and speak, or *vice-versa*?

Which is the chicken, and which the egg? Is the seemingly terminal disease of a once beautiful language the result of it having been infected by globalisation, in turn infecting the FCO? Or is the latter, traditionally a bastion of good Standard English, giving up the ghost, and succumbing to a politically correct “New Left” Blairite culture, in turn infected by globalisation? Has the creeping homogenisation and “dumbing-down” of various forms of English adversely affected our language, or has an increasing aversion to mental precision in our globalised FCO affected good English? After all, the essential to good diplomacy is precision, while its main enemy is imprecision.²

The power of political linguistics is still undervalued; hence there is only scant understanding of how language affects relations between states. In the words of a leading Russian academic³, English is becoming increasingly simplified as, indeed, are other languages; thus the need to study language becomes less pressing in our whirlwind of a world. Simplifying means globalising, because global values (whatever they may

¹ Attributed to Confucius.

² See Nicolson, Harold, *Diplomacy*, Oxford University Press, 1969, p. 60.

³ I thank Pavel Kanevsky, Deputy Dean of International Relations in the Sociology Faculty of Lomonosov Moscow State University for this pithy yet thoughtful observation.

be) cannot be complex, as they need to be simple and understandable (whatever “understandable” means). That is how pop art was created, arguably becoming one of the first universal cultural languages. Just as contemporary art, as well as culture in general, reflects global cultural values, so English, currently the only truly global language, is taken by many to represent global business. Hence the increasing marketing-influenced slogonisation of the language, paradoxically often accompanied by linguistic bulimia.

This book is about far more than words and their use. It sets out to illustrate, by means of extracts from official documents and with the cooperation of a select group of concerned diplomats, how the English language has deteriorated between the late Seventies and the first decade of our current century. At the same time, we shall examine the extent to which this deterioration is associated with organisational, technological (computerisation) and cultural (positive discrimination, sexual mores) changes within the FCO, themselves products of so-called phenomena such as Major’s “classless society”, Blair’s “Cool Britannia”, and now Cameron’s “fairer and multicultural Britain.” The more that politicians stress the importance of diversity in society, the more auto-lobotomised and homogenised we actually become. Many believe that these factors have also contributed to an increasingly close relationship with the foreign policy of the United States of America, to the extent that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the FCO from the State Department, at least as regards the formulation of British objectives. A recent booklet issued to FCO staff graces us with the words: “Stakeholder management is the core of diplomacy and service delivery”.⁴ This is simply balderdash. George Orwell must be spinning in his grave.

Drivel

This deterioration in effective written language has been accompanied by attempts on the part of some language pundits to relegate Standard English to the status of a dialect, for various fashionable reasons that I shall pinpoint and discuss in Chapter Five. Before kicking off with a cerebral underpinning to set the tone, let us quote a recently retired ambassador to whom I showed a draft of the beginning of this book: “Bill, I think this is a good start with plenty of solid bones on which to hang some meat. I like the stupid quote at the end mentioning stakeholders and service delivery.

⁴ Mcdonagh, Melanie, ‘Sir Humphrey’s new suit’, *The Spectator*, 22 January, 2011.

The worrying thing about this is that very senior officials are writing or approving this sort of drivel. What are young people in the FCO to think? Most will adopt the same style of writing. I feel sorry for them. I, at least, had some excellent scholars to emulate even though I could never quite match their standards. They knew how to write clear and precise English.”

The Demise of Collective Memory

Another recently-retired ambassador simply said that the FCO’s collective memory has gone. We shall elaborate on his reasoning later, bearing in mind that diplomacy was considered to be “a continuous process and that its basic principles represent the accumulated experience of generations of wise and reasonable men.”⁵ Suffice it to say, for now, that the possible demise of Standard English and its transmogrification into a simplistic form of business English, spread among different Englishes, could signal the end of English itself as a serious, consistent form of communication, both written and oral. This would clearly have negative implications for effective relations between states. Perhaps it already is. FCO English is a useful gauge, hence this book. Let us now set the tone more specifically, by quoting from a recent internal FCO advertisement for a “Reputation Manager”:

*Maintenance and development of the UK narrative around FCO and its value proposition, using insights from research and evaluation as well as knowledge of the evolving FCO strategy to inform resonant messaging.*⁶

In plain Standard English, this simply means: working out improved ways of informing people about the FCO’s work.

The increasing lack of precision of much of the English language, whether inside or beyond the FCO, can be said to reflect, among other things, a general decline in standards of education. If we accept that English has become truly global, this obviously has enormous implications for the effect of English not only on native speakers, but on other languages. Greek, for example, has been adversely affected, not only by state manipulation of the language, which has included the doing away with many of the aspirates, but by English and American English itself, and the use of words such as “space”, “project” and “business plan”, for which a Greek equivalent exists. A major paradox and irony here is that

⁵ Op.cit., Nicolson, p. 29.

⁶ Hough, Andrew, ‘Foreign Office second language is gibberish, says Plain English Campaign’, *Daily Telegraph*, 10 December 2010.

much English (as well as other European languages) is based on ancient Greek. I simply mention the above, in case some readers assume that this is a book on comparative etymology⁷, when it is in fact an attempt to show that the spread of global English and the concomitant Americanisation of communication in the FCO is undermining Britain's independence.

⁷ *The Loom of Language* (Bodmer, Frederick, W.W. Norton and Company, New York and London, 1985, originally published in 1944), even if slightly outdated, provides a fascinating analysis of the history of language.

CHAPTER ONE

SETTING THE TONE

*Where is the wisdom lost to knowledge, where is the knowledge lost to information, and where is the word we lost in words?*¹

The Global World

I wonder if I can do it.

The above tautological title² is a typical example of the imprecise but sweet-sounding linguistically bloated phraseology that has accompanied globalisation and the so-called “information explosion”. Let us look briefly at the background.

It is hardly a secret that the phenomenon of globalisation³ and the much publicised and discussed “information revolution” appeared in tandem, and were presented by the international business machine as new and positive phenomena, even if globalisation, in fact if not in name, began almost five hundred years ago, with Magellan’s circumnavigation.⁴

Well before the advent of the Internet, the Marshall Plan’s slogan “Prosperity makes you Free”⁵ accompanied the expansion of giant multinationals into Western Europe, and the subsequent marketing of American business ideas. Later on, the advent of the Internet, and the possibility of instant communication and access to information that would otherwise

¹ Eliot, T.S., *The Rock*, Faber and Faber, London, 1934, in Menzeniotis, Dionisis, ‘Demystifying Knowledge Society and its alleged ‘Education’, *Cosmothemata*, vol.2, no. 2, New York College, Athens, July 2005.

² A globe is simply a round planet, such as our Earth. Thus ‘global world’ simply means ‘global globe’, or, at a pinch, ‘round world’.

³ According to the *Financial Times Lexicon*, ‘globalisation’ is the integration of economies, industries, markets, cultures and policy-making around the world.

⁴ Metaphorically speaking, since it was only his ship that managed to sail around our globe, whereas Magellan was killed by natives.

⁵ Carruthers, Susan L., ‘Not like us? Europeans and the Spread of American Culture’, *International Affairs*, vol.74, no. 4, London, October 1998.

have taken days, or even weeks, to obtain, led to a rapid acceleration of the pace at which people worked and lived, with increasingly packed agendas and one deadline after another. “Global marketing” and “communication” became the new catchwords, with large multinationals sometimes cleverly disguising their agendas with the phrase “think local”. An enormous push came with the so-called “Third Way”, an attempt by President Clinton, Prime Minister Blair and others to distract people from the “extremes” of the two dominant philosophies of the Cold War divide, by using a “third way”, a sort of “New Centre” born of the “New Left”, promoted in Anthony Giddens’ book⁶. In short, a warped form of meta-Marxism. Third Way speeches and pamphlets defined the new approach by describing what it was not, rather than precisely what it was. They contained many references to globalisation, hardly ever mentioned the word “liberty”, but did use the word “fraternity”. This can be seen as an attempt to merge politics and business. For Ralph Dahrendorf, the famous educationalist, the Third Way betrayed an absence of historical awareness and “an unfortunate need to have a unified, or at least uniquely labelled, ideology, at a moment when the age of systems should have passed.”⁷ Perhaps the last word should lie with Charles de Gaulle, who said, well before the Third Way hit the streets, that he saw three paths for civilisation: totalitarian communism, capitalism and participation, explaining the latter by saying that priority should be accorded to the human condition. At any rate, the Third Way, although it has disappeared in name, nevertheless epitomises the tendency towards the use of global sloganising as a way of promoting globalisation.

So much for this brief overview of the background. Let us now turn to higher education, taking as an example the English case, since it serves as a good starting point for discussing trends in other countries. Moreover, it permits us to understand how new entrants to the Diplomatic Service differ somewhat from their predecessors.

Expansion Pains

The above phenomena coincided with a trend for increasing the number of full-time students, often for political reasons, such as reducing

⁶ Giddens, Anthony, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*, Wiley, 1998.

⁷ Dahrendorf, Ralph, ‘The Third Way and Liberty-An Authoritarian Streak in Europe’s New Centre’, *Foreign Affairs*, vol.78, no.5, New York, September/October 1999.

unemployment among school-leavers. This explosion in student numbers led to the so-called “dumbing-down of education” starting under Margaret Thatcher’s premiership in the Eighties. Before 1992, there were fifty-four universities in Britain. In 1992, thirty-eight were added, and by 2011, the total had climbed to one hundred and twenty-seven. Most of the newcomers were not actually new but, to be able to call themselves universities, simply expanded from being colleges of higher education – often changing their name – to meet various quantitative criteria. Students now became customers, buyers of knowledge. The manic expansion led to considerable organisational problems, a drop in standards and a lack of transparency and accountability, even leading to some closures and mergers in recent years. A plethora of new subjects was introduced. “Relevance” was the catchword; relevance to the modern world, with the laudable aim of ensuring that young graduates were ready for the job market. Degrees in new subjects were introduced, such as in nursing. Thus, nurses now had a Bachelor of Science, leading to many no longer wishing to clean bedpans, since this was considered too demeaning for university graduates. Degrees in public relations were introduced, as well as in catch-all communications studies, which could sometimes include media studies. Specialisation increased: along with “niche” marketing came “niche degrees”. “Bums on seats” was the name of the game. Students were now customers, paying thousands of pounds a year in tuition fees, into the bargain. However, not too much serious attention was paid to the job market.

It was somewhat naively – or more likely, ingeniously ingenuously – claimed that natural market forces would solve any potential problems. This was the age of the surge in MBAs. Inexorably they found their way on to the European continent. The humanities were to some extent considered passé and not relevant in the brave new world of customers and clients. Mistakes were made, and still are. For example, in Britain, in 1997, only about half the public relations consultancies took on PR graduates.⁸ This was because graduates in, for example, cognate disciplines such as English literature, history and philosophy tended to be better at research, analysis, evaluation, and communicating ideas clearly and cogently.

Many employers complain today that some graduates cannot write properly, despite our brave new world. There is a sneaking feeling in some quarters that the flashy language that now characterises, and claims to

⁸ Mallinson, William, ‘Whither PR Graduates?’, *Journal of Communication Management*, vol. 3, no. 1, London, August 1998.

improve, standards, in fact reflects a lack of substance, and is a mere marketing ploy that has adversely affected the traditional subjects of the humanities. “Knowledge management”, “total quality management”, “benchmarking”, “management by objectives” and “key performance indicators” are the order of the day, along, of course, with “the global world”. While such language is that of competitive business, it sits rather uncomfortably in the strictly academic world, which is being adversely affected by the bureaucratisation of scholarship, a word strangely absent from much of the new “global” terminology.

Steppenwolf

Today, many universities have been transmogrified from places of research, thinking and learning into professional training centres. There is nothing wrong with professional training, of course; indeed, it is vital. But the flip side comes with the “Steppenwolf effect”: side-by-side with the new training-oriented degrees are traditional disciplines such as history and literature. The humanities are now included in the new business approach. Thus, in apparent efforts to improve quality, the humanities have to justify their existence through Research Assessment Exercises (RAE), in which certain quantitative research criteria have to be met to attract state funding: for example, the number of publications, the name of the publisher, the number of citations and number of pages. In practice, it is virtually impossible to monitor in any serious fashion the actual *quality* of work produced, given tight deadlines and a limited number of evaluation staff. The system also forces academics to rush their research and writing in order to meet market objectives. So, tough luck for the serious scholar who needs to spend ten years researching and writing a *magnum opus*, and who is not capable of churning out paper after paper.

At a recent conference entitled “Education and Innovation in the 21st Century: Opening Frontiers for the Business Market (is there any market that is not a business market?)”, Microsoft’s Vice-president of Worldwide Public Sector Education kept emphasising the importance of re-inventing the way we learn. As common sense suggests to us that humanity has been learning since Adam and Eve, one is inclined to wonder what he meant by “learn” and “re-invent”. But he did not explain. One can assume that he meant that information technology and globalisation are perhaps synonymous with re-inventing, although he did not actually say that.

These examples of sloppy thinking and, therefore, of speaking and writing, are partly the result of the dumbing-down of education and the rush away from the teaching of grammar. Yet without a clear

understanding of sentence structure and word-forms, accurate expression is thrown out of the window, often resulting in facile, over-simplified, ambivalent and meaningless language.

At the above-mentioned conference, the representative of a well-known global educational organisation, The British Council, managed, in the space of only a few minutes, to come up with phrases and expressions such as: “We all live in a global world”, “intercultural skills”, “global citizenship”, “shared future”, “knowledge workers”, “knowledge creation”, “shared values”, “cutting edge English language”, “education as a force for change” and, of course “innovation”. This free and automatic use of American – and now English and global – business phraseology seems now to be a *sine qua non* of all budding modern educationalists who see education as a measurable and expandable business market, whether public or private. The problem is that much of their language lacks intrinsic meaning, even if it can sound erotic and seductive. In this context, globalisation really means homogenisation, since the more uniform the customers, the simpler and cheaper the production, promotion and selling of educational goods.

The next step from the simplistic but seductive phrase “managing change” is managing, or rather, controlling, thought, as we glide blindly into an Orwellian state of mass intellectual castration, induced not only from outside, but also by our own mental sloth and consequent lack of independent thinking. By using another trendy word, “empowerment”, the marketeers have also sold us the idea that we are strong and independent. In fact, we are becoming the opposite. People can even suffer from a form of cognitive self-dissonance, and rationalise themselves into believing that they are something which they are not. For example, a man who believes himself to be a gentleman dies trying to rescue a dog. In William Somerset Maugham’s words:

Like a man who cherishes a vice till it gets a stranglehold on him so that he is its helpless slave, he had lied so long that he had come to believe his own lies. Bob Forrester had pretended for so many years to be a gentleman that in the end, forgetting that it was all a fake, he had found himself driven to act as, in that stupid, conventional brain of his, he thought a gentleman must act. No longer knowing the difference between sham and real, he had sacrificed his life to a spurious heroism.

In short, I submit that the speed of living, and in particular, of working, with its constant deadlines and targets, drains much of the mental space required for the detachment needed to consider and judge what to do; hence the tendency to fall into a prescribed pattern of action, which

becomes a self-imposed prison. This speed syndrome perhaps helps to explain the inane and often inappropriate use of expressions such as “going forward”, “drawing a line under”, “shoulder-to-shoulder” and the like, when used metaphorically. Thus, we turn to meaning.

The End of Meaning

While this is not the place for a deep analysis of the linguistics, semantics and semiotics of education à la de Saussure and Eco, we must permit ourselves some brief observations on the terminology used, simply because it does seem that there is a lack of precision. This may well reflect a lack of understanding by business managers of the intrinsic value of education, as opposed to their understanding of selling educational tools willy-nilly. What, for example, is a “knowledge worker”? Is this a meta-Marxist term for teachers working in the field of knowledge? Is it someone trying to create knowledge? Is it a teacher? And if so, on whose terms? The obsession with the word “knowledge” knows no bounds. Unlike data/information, knowledge cannot be quantified. In the words of Lin Yutang, putting human affairs into exact formulae shows a lack of wisdom.⁹ In other words, you cannot catch the human mind, on which the very existence of knowledge depends. It is quite possible that, bored with the phrase “knowledge management”, the slogan-sellers will soon start using the catchphrase “wisdom management”. The whole question is already catapulting itself out of serious debate.

And what is “managing change”? Could it mean “manipulating events”? For that matter, what is meant by “change”? Innovation? Substitution? Development? To borrow from, and paraphrase George Orwell slightly, is there not a danger that those who use the above phrases are turning themselves into machines? Certainly, the appropriate noises come out of their mouths, but their brains are not as involved as they would be if they were choosing words for themselves, rather than using catchphrases. And if they are repeating the same words, they can even become unconscious of what they are saying. This reduced state of consciousness naturally encourages conformity among the purveyors of this kind of language, the hegemonolinguistic terminology of globalisation. These poor man’s sophists, these creators of “shared values”, by sleepwalking into a state of utter conformity, naturally influence the audiences, who can themselves eventually be seduced into

⁹ Yutang, Lin, *The Importance of Living*, William Heinemann Ltd., London, 1938, p. 5.

automatic acceptance that their values are shared by everybody else. In short, independence of thought is flushed down the lavatory bowl, while redundant shibboleths rule the pseudo-linguistic roost.

In the end, the inappropriate use of technology actually means that communication is destroying communication, ironically in the name of communication. The answer is to forget the obsession with “going forward”, and to go backwards, by bringing back the basics: good grammar, clarity of expression, and reading skills. If one looks at examination papers from the sixties set for the Common Entrance for public (independent) schools, taken by twelve and thirteen-year old pupils, they are equivalent in standard to something between today’s GCSE and A Levels. The fact is that today’s young people are less educated than their forbears many years ago. This quote by a former colleague sums up the malaise:

It would seem that what you have observed at the FCO is very much a reflection of what has happened in this country (ie the UK) to our language over the last 20 years or so. My children (and their generation) speak among themselves a kind of patois which older folks can barely understand, nor do they write letters to their friends, so that the abbreviated language of text messages and casual email phraseology has replaced the far more formal style used in earlier days by the likes of you and me. I would guess that we are now seeing the end of letter-writing per se and with it the ability to compose properly structured and grammatically correct reports etc. As I write this, I’m aware that it lacks a certain degree of finesse purely because it’s an email and I’m not treating it with as much care as I would if I were writing a letter. Enough said!¹⁰

I began this chapter by wondering whether I could do it. I wanted to point to a quality which is becoming increasingly rare in the world of fast technology, in a world where people think that they think, but do not contemplate. In order to really think, to reflect and to consider, one actually needs space *not* to think. Speed can destroy judgment. “What is this life, if full of care, we have no time to stand and stare?”¹¹ In short, we need to use information technology responsibly, and not to be taken over, à la Frankenstein, by our own creation. The quality, by the way, to which I am referring, is of course common sense.

Let us now turn to Her Majesty’s Diplomatic Service, the élite of the FCO, in its turn the élite of the Civil Service, that centre of well-spoken

¹⁰ A friend of mine who was a ‘friend’ – FCO terminology for our MI6 brethren South of the river.

¹¹ William Davies.

people – be they English, Welsh, Scottish, Irish or Cumbrian – who are charged with representing and promoting the interests of the United Kingdom. I shall summarise how I was taught to improve my English in the mid- to late-seventies.