Save us from pomposity and linguistic porridge

Linguistic distortion reflects distorted values, just as linguistic redundancy reflects poor quality thinking. Let's take a look at language use and misuse.

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Published: September 18, 2006 Last updated: December 2, 2015

One of the least exciting aspects of academic life is wading through the great piles of paper that emanate from government bodies of various kinds.

Week after week, trees are felled to provide the paper for redundant messages, usually referred to as "consultation exercises". This is hardly new, of course, and 19th century writers were complaining of similar bureaucratic excesses, but what does seem to be new is the language in which so much of this stuff is written. Sometimes I feel I need a dictionary to help me understand what is being said, and I am supposed to be an expert on languages.

Words are misused, abused or strung together in meaningless sentences. Let's take a few recent examples. I sat in a meeting the other day where some HR bloke (yes, personnel departments have now moved up-market to become Human Resource units) explained the policy of "supporting presenteeism". What does this mean in English?

Well, you're not supposed to chide people who don't turn up for work, (absenteeism, to you and me) as this sends the wrong message: chiding might make them feel uncared for. Instead, you encourage them to be present. Positive presenteeism is the name of this game. When I pointed out that people are actually paid to be present if in employment, I met with stony looks.

Linguistic distortion reflects distorted values, just as linguistic redundancy reflects poor quality thinking. The Higher Education Funding Council's strategic plan boldly sets out aims and objectives which, when scrutinised, turn into a sort of linguistic porridge, all gloop and no taste. What, in plain English, does it mean to state that one aim is to ensure "that research can be supported without prejudice to the sustainability of the sector's long-term financial, physical and human resources, or the delivery of other activities in the public interest"? I bet 10 people sitting in a room would translate that sentence into 10 completely different things.

All too often in these communiqués words mean next to nothing when analysed closely. One key test in finding out what words mean is to translate them into other languages.

I took part in a workshop recently for quality assurance agencies across Europe, and we looked long and hard at the recent document with the grand title of "Standards and Guidelines of Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area", written in a weird kind of international bureaucratic English, a language not actually spoken or written by anyone other than the producers of such documents. Yet that document has to be translated into all the EU languages, a truly daunting task as the invented language of quality assurance doesn't make much sense to anybody. As
we looked at some of the key terms, it was obvious that they meant all kinds of different things to different people.

Self-evaluation in the UK is seen as something significantly different from self-assessment (though line up half a dozen people at random and I bet they can't explain the difference), but in Finnish, for example, there is one word for both. Nor do many languages have a way of distinguishing between quality and standards or between aims and objectives, they simply have the same word for both.

And how does that weasel word "robust" translate into Bulgarian or Swedish, particularly when used in a sentence like this from a recent circular, informing us that we "may identify one or two areas where your time allocation collection could be made more robust"? What is robust time allocation collecting, and how can you distinguish a robust collector from a weedy one?

My other objection to all this verbal diarrhoea is that while some of it is written in such obfuscatory English that it appears unintelligible, the rest is patronisingly simplistic and appears to have been written for illiterates. Here is a staggering sentence from a grand-sounding document produced by several quangos on managing ethics in higher education. Institutions are urged to develop what is called a "framework" that should then be published. After this, we are pompously informed "it is vital that relevant individuals - such as staff, students and members of governing bodies - read the document." Isn't that blindingly obvious?

Why bother to write it in the first place if you suspect nobody is going to read it, though given how it is written, I doubt that many will get beyond the first few paragraphs. I fill countless black plastic bags with unread documents with portentous titles and I know I'm not alone.

My idea of hell would be to be locked in a room with the people who write this stuff and forced to read it for ever.

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