

SOME DO *NOT'S* FOR ORATORICAL CLARITY

by
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PART FOUR: CLOUDY IMAGERY, VAGUE PRONOUNS, IMPROPER SUBORDINATION, AND WEAK PARALLELISM

LEARN WHAT NOT TO DO!

As stated in Part One of this series treating oratorical clarity (See *Rostrum*, March 2002, p. 43), perhaps the most practical way to improve oratorical effectiveness is to emphasize what not to do. In other words, the orator should focus on those features which compete with clarity. Like the first three, this article does not treat every obstacle to clear thought, for such endeavor would be futile for any person. Instead, this article covers four of the most notorious obstacles and sufficiently warns the orator to examine carefully language usage. The author

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assumes from his teaching and coaching experience that, if the orator knows **what should not be done**, he or she will employ **what should be done**. This article stresses cloudy imagery, vague pronouns, improper subordination, and weak parallelism.

DON'T USE CLOUDY IMAGERY!

Imagery traditionally means the ability of words to evoke mental pictures. To evoke clear mental pictures is a trait which all orators should master, but unfortunately some fail to do so. Some orators are ineffective because they employ imagery that is incongruous with nature. For instance, a high school student referred to "an obscure climate of the human intellect." What clear thought can an audience receive from such words? What is an obscure *climate* of the human intellect? In fact, what is any *climate* of the mind? Another high school student informed her hearers that "abstinence is healthy if practiced in moderation." Huh? How does one *abstain* by taking only a small portion?

A college student bragged that his state "has an iron chain of mountains running through her center, which God placed there to milk the clouds and to be the source

of her silver rivers." What corresponds to a chain of mountains drawing milk from the clouds? Such imagery taxes the audience to discover resemblances which fail to exist.

In a keynote address to freshmen during orientation week, a college professor alluded to "Cadmus, Agenor, and Europa"; to "Lesbian and Chian wines"; and to "the lard of the Apulian swine and the condited bellies of the scarus." The professor employed imagery that only people familiar with the classics could interpret. Many of the professor's audience were not so trained in high school, so communication broke down.

Other orators hamper communication by employing highly emotional but vague adjectives. For example, what homogeneous image can an audience achieve from such words as *awful*, *elegant*, *fantastic*, *fabulous*, *glorious*, *lovely*, *magnificent*, *sensational*, *stupendous*, and *wonderful*? Yet these words appear frequently in contemporary discourse.

Confusion also can come from such commonly used words as *bald*, *overweight*, *heavy*, *large*, *old*, *middle-aged*, *young*, *short*, *tall*, *thin*, and *wide*. For instance, what does it mean to say that someone is *bald*? Does a bald man lack hair all over his head? Just on the sides? Just in front or in back? Is a heavy person 200 pounds? 300 pounds? A person

who is 120 pounds could be heavy for the balancing bar in gymnastics; a person who is 260 pounds could be small for defensive tackle in professional football; and a person who is 350 pounds could be small in sumo wrestling. Someone who is 35 could be old for some professional sports, yet an 80-year-old parachutist could be young in attitude and health.

Other commonly used, but often unnecessarily vague, words are *many*, *most*, *few*, *several*, *lots*, *some*, *least*, and the like. Students of oratory should not abandon these words completely, but if precise numbers can be employed, then statistics rather than the above adjectives should be used. For instance, if 65 students out of 100 students taking an examination passed, then the orator should report that "65 out of 100 students taking the examination passed." This is clearer than saying, "More than half of the students taking the examination passed"; or "Many students passed the examination"; or "Some students failed the examination." Orators who use such vague expressions unnecessarily perhaps are too lazy, apathetic, or even timid to research the facts and specify their thoughts.

Oratorical ineffectiveness also occurs from the em-

ployment of adjectives that function not to present objective description, but to express personal feelings. Examples occurred when students described a young, wealthy man as "that poor, old man"; women who get abortions as legally protected murderers"; and unmarried, teenage mothers as "little old ladies at home." Confusion occurs when the audience is uncertain whether the orator's words are to be taken literally or figuratively. Adjectives should clarify, not confuse.

To improve their use of imagery, students of oratory should read the works of speakers and authors known for their mastery of evoking clear, mental pictures. For example, clear imagery indeed appears in Wilfred Owen's poem, *Dulce et Decorum Est*, which describes the horror of a gas attack during World War I. The poem constitutes a commentary on the ancient Latin patriotic motto in the last two lines: "It is sweet and becoming to die for one's country."

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.

Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of disappointed shells that dropped behind.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And floundering like a man in fire or lime. --
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light
as under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, --
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro Patria Mori.

Indeed, Owens described scenes which unlikely will occur today, but he well exemplifies how imagery can be clear, real, and intense; and that unclear imagery is useless in an orator's repertoire.

DON'T USE VAGUE PRONOUNS!

Whenever an audience has to ponder over the substantive to which a pronoun refers, oratory is ineffective. For illustration, a clergyman remarked that "men look with an evil eye upon the good that is in others, and think that their reputation obscures them, and that their commendable qualities do stand in their light; and there-

fore they do what they can to cast a cloud over them." Who are *theft*? To whom does *them* refer? Who or what is *their*? What is the meaning of any pronoun in such a mess? Little wonder why the clergyman's parishioners criticized his sermons.

A university student working for the Admissions Department on his campus informed a group of prospects that "at this university nearly all of the students know their professors and they are in the habit of calling them by their first names." Do the professors call their students by first name, or do the students call their professors by first name? The campus atmosphere seems informal, but *who* is doing *what* according to the speaker?

After interviewing his university's president, a student reported that the president "recalls vividly the beautifully written letters he has received from his father since he has left home." Did the father leave home, or was it the son? To whom does the last *he* refer?

A university student reported that "the Memphis (Tennessee) draft board has declared a Catholic priest draftable and rescinded his draft exemption, less than a week after a Memphis bishop announced his support for the anti-war movement." To whom does *his* refer? Did the priest or the Bishop support the anti-war movement?

Students of oratory should review their grammar and make certain that their pronouns clearly point to correct antecedents.

DON'T USE IMPROPER SUBORDINATION!

Confusion can occur when sentence elements of unlike importance are linked together as equals. In other words, a less important element should be subordinate to a more important one.

For instance, a young missionary visiting his family in Wisconsin reported to a group of Rotarians that "during my first night in Africa, a young native with a gun broke into my office and demanded money, but I was engaged in an important discussion with the church elders." It appears that the missionary was too busy to give money to the demanding and threatening thief. This is not what the missionary meant. However, the missionary caused thoughtless coordination, for he treated the motive for the act as if it were the matter of importance. The act itself was relegated to the subordinate position. The missionary should have said, for example, "During my first night in Africa, while I was engaged in an important discussion with the church elders, a young native with a gun broke into my office and demanded money."

Orators who fail to recognize sentence elements of unequal importance should not expect favorable feedback from the audience.

DON'T USE WEAK PARALLELISM!

The main principle of *parallelism* is that similar meanings should have similar construction. For instance, in his Inaugural Address John F. Kennedy generated clarity by putting into similar construction ideas of similar importance. He said, for instance, "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty."

Later, in the same address, Kennedy alluded to "those nations who would make themselves our adversary," and said: So let us begin anew, remembering on both sides that civility is not a sign of weakness and sincerity is always (Mannebach continued to page 101)

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subject to proof. Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate. Let both sides explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring those problems which divide us. Let both sides, for the first time, formulate serious and precise proposals for the inspection and control of arms and bring the absolute power to destroy other nations under the absolute control of all nations. Let both sides seek to invoke the wonders of science instead of the terrors. Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths, and encourage the arts and commerce. Let both sides unite to heed in all corners of the earth the command of Isaiah to "undo the heavy burdens and let the oppressed go free." And if a beachhead of cooperation may push back the jungle of suspicion, let both sides join in creating a new endeavor, not a new balance of power but a new world of law, where the strong are just and the weak secure and the peace preserved.

Unfortunately, not all communication is like the above. For instance, a university student declared, "Henry rushed out of this mechanical and monotonous society to get rid of restraints, and he dared challenging sea life." The statement is confusing because of the mixed verb forms. The student would have been clearer by saying, "To rush out of this mechanical and monotonous society to rid himself of restraints, Henry dared to challenge sea life."

A university freshman reported to the fraternity he was hoping to pledge: "I enjoy hunting moose, hiking in forests and rock concerts. I also like to play the piano and be at tournament chess." For better parallelism and clarity, he could have said, "I like hunting moose, hiking in forests, attending rock concerts, playing the piano, and playing or observing tournament chess."

An audience distracted by uncoordinated relations can fail to comprehend what immediately follows the structural errors, because it is too engaged in trying to extract the sense of the errors. The portion not understood could be the thesis, or key idea, of the address. When an audience fails to comprehend message, oratory fails.

CONCLUSION

Only by striving for clear imagery and proper reference, subordination, and parallelism can orators hope to be persuasive. If forensic coaches seem a bit relentless in their criticism, orators should meditate on Shakespeare's line in The Merry Wives of Windsor (V .iii), namely, "Better a little chiding [during practice] than a great deal of heartbreak [from poor performance at a forensic tournament]."

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