

Words of the Wasteland

Against a Plastic Language

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2020

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Speech is a spell, and words, once ejected into the air, warp the weave of worlds.

–Ho Tzu Nyen.

Language is world-warping, world-making. This is an old understanding of the weight of a word. Mythology, folklore, origin stories across the world tell of the power of the word, of how speaking words can birth the world and its occupants. Language is powerful. Words paint the world with color, culture, history, and context. It is through language and through words that people interpret their worlds.

As we accept and acknowledge the world warping ways of language, we would do well to expose those places in which those with power wield language gatedly—inaccessible in a selective way. These places, *these worlds* are woven for only a select few to know and understand, and when these places critically affect, mutilate, and yet generally exclude our world, that we must pay close attention, and ask: Why is this so? How does this continue to be? And, what can be done?

Today, in many ways, it is the language of science that wants to paint our perspective of the world. It likes to tell us who we are, why we are here, and what might happen next. But it also conceals much from us. Scientific language can be impenetrable and inaccessible to a general public, and this inaccessibility can be traced back to the foundational birthing of modern science. Some of the earliest scientific institutions, for example (circa 1560-1700) shared scientific findings using highly technical vocabulary—a shared language among scientists of the day, but to anyone else, incomprehensible¹. This exclusionary language served as an early form of scientific jargon, which created a dissonance between scientist and layperson that was often intentional. Aside from this scientific jargon, Latin was the original language of science. Botanist Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) is widely known for carving up the world he observed around him using Binomial Nomenclature, which gave animals and plants specific Latin names. Scientists also published in Latin. At a glance, this use of Latin appears to be a way to write about science objectively. Latin was a dead language. There was no one and no culture alive to claim Latin as their own tongue. Because Latin belonged to no one, it could theoretically belong to everyone equally. However, this only makes sense if Latin were understood equally by everyone. Instead, it was only the colleges and schools that taught Latin, meaning that the uneducated masses would largely not be able to understand anything written in this tongue. Historian George Sarton notes that Latin “was the esoteric language used to prevent the dissemination of learning to people who were deemed unworthy of it, or who might make a bad use of it”². Giambattista Dealla Porta, who created one of the earlier and more experimental institutions of science in the 1560s, “wrote in Latin, and not for the people”³. Francis Bacon, the first philosopher of modern science and the father of empiricism, may have insisted that the study of science was to better mankind, yet his agenda would also appear to have included using science to reinforce the dominance and power of elites. He is quoted as saying, “I do not like the word People” whom he regarded as “the commonality” or “the meaner sort”⁴. Among many of the scientific elite, there was distrust of uneducated people, and a desire to keep them in the dark from scientific pursuits.

¹ Gilbert & Stocklmayer 2012 and Daston & Galison 2009

² Conners 2005: 306

³ Conners 2005: 362

⁴ Conners 2005: 362

Today, we can find contemporary examples of this foundational inaccessibility of science when we consider the academic journals and articles that are only accessible to students or academics, or those who pay for membership and access.

It is truly the word of science that now dominates our language and that paints our world. Lexicographers have found science and technology to be responsible for nearly half of the new words added to the English language in the 20th century. A linguistic study reveals that 45% of new words created between 1960 and 1985 were born on behalf of science and technology⁵. When scientists write about their findings, they create highly specific new words that will be almost exclusively used only by those of specific disciplines—scientific jargon.

Outside of compartmentalized disciplines, and for everyone else, this jargon confuses. It distracts. It complicates and frustrates. It serves to subtly reinforce the specialization of divided labor. This compartmentalization of language says to us, “Leave it to the experts”. It makes the discourse of science largely inaccessible, and therefore unassailable, because readers struggle to grasp concepts when they are several layers removed—abstracted—from their original context. Such barriers to understanding are measurable. It is estimated that in general academic texts, there is 5% jargon, 80% high frequency or commonly used familiar words and somewhere between 8-10% academic vocabulary. In scientific academic texts, however, jargon is around 22%. When the Flesch Reading Ease (FRE) test—a test which measures a text’s readability from 0 (unreadable) to 100 (understandable)—was applied to Summaries for Policymakers from The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the document scored below 20, a dishearteningly low score for an organization that is chiefly charged with the task of monitoring research in global climate change and effectively sharing that information with the general public⁶.

Concepts rendered in unfamiliar, idiosyncratic grammar and syntax becomes, in effect, a foreign language—unreadable and unspeakable by those for whom the language nonetheless bears upon. This creates a form of illiteracy that defends science against comprehension, contestation, and resistance.

Creating new words is a fundamental component of language that keeps it alive and relevant as our values, beliefs, and ways of communicating with one another and within the world that shifts and changes around us. However, scientific jargon is dehumanizing in its abstraction. It diminishes the scientist’s ability to communicate appropriately and effectively with other people. There are times when this gap in understanding can have distressing consequences. For example, when a genetic counselor discusses with a pregnant woman the risks that her unborn child may pose, there is a tangible, if not *provable* dissonance between the words and concepts that need to be relayed to the pregnant woman and her own understanding of her baby. Silya Samerski relays such a scene in which a genetic counselor seeks to advise a pregnant woman:

1. The geneticist talks to a laywoman. He has to spell out his knowledge in such a way that normal people can follow him. To do so, he has to find everyday words for notions like chromosomal aberration, DNA-mutation and probability model.
2. Once talked to, the client is urged to make a decision. This decision is, in some way, a decision about life and death, about delivering a child or terminating a pregnancy. Facing the counselor’s genetic mumbo jumbo the client inevitably asks herself: What does all this say about

⁵ Stivers 2006

⁶ Rakedzon et al. 2017

me? What does all this mean to me? Genetic counseling is a glaring example of the clash between scientific concepts and everyday meaning (Samerski, 2002, p. 6).

This is an example of a delicate situation in which both parties would greatly benefit from sensitivity to and skillfulness in translating between specialized jargon and the ordinary vernaculars of lay people. We can see here how the “mumbo jumbo” of jargon aggravates confusion, dissonance, and distance between the pregnant woman and the genetic counselor.

Intentional, objective abstraction from human emotion and bias carried into this sort of situation is emotionally devastating. To the would-be mother, her could-be child has been transformed before her very eyes into a frightening, dangerous risk. Dehumanizing, indeed. But it is not only dehumanizing, it is also disempowering. In this case, the mother is rendered powerless at the hands of the genetic counselor—her knowledge of her body, her womb, and her baby is inconsequential next to the knowledge of the scientific expert: The Genetic Counselor.

While a certain technicality of scientific language may be inevitable, a censored, inaccessible, and disempowering dissemination of information is not.

Science plays host to another class of inaccessible terms, which, compared to scientific jargon, are largely unknown and unrecognized for what they are. In 1988, linguist and philosopher Uwe Poerksen wrote a book called *Plastic Words: The Tyranny of a Modular Language* which discusses ‘plastic words’, named for their plasticity and malleability. Plastic words stem from the vernacular, migrate into scientific discourse, and then return to the common tongue⁷. In this migration, meaning is lost, but in the absence of meaning, these words bear a new and more dangerous burden: a hollow, powerful aura evoking a sense of *correctness* that invites a breathless silence. Poerksen’s plastic words are imprecise and vague, often interchangeable. For example, “communication” can be used to describe many different things: a person talking to another person, a cat meowing, a smartphone receiving data from a satellite, etc. More specifically descriptive and contextualized terms, like *talk*, *meow*, or *transmit data* are eschewed in favor of a generalizing, less communicative term: *communication*.

Here are Uwe Poerksen’s plastic words:

accomplishment, basic needs, capitalization, care, center, communication, consumption, contact, decision, development, education, energy, exchange, factor, function, future, growth, health, identity, information, living standard, management, modernization, model, partner, planning, problem, process, production, productivity, progress, project, quality, raw material, relationship, resource, role, service, sexuality, solution, strategy, structure, substance, system, value, work, workplace⁸.

Sound familiar? I’m certain they do. But what do these words *mean*? Resources—be they plant, animal, or mineral? Are they human (resources) or natural (resources)? Are they growing or shrinking? Are we supposed to put money into them, or are they our money, already?

Let’s take the plastic word “management” and unpack it in more depth to illustrate the ingenious and nefarious characteristics of these sorts of words. Management is a marriage of the prefix *manage* and the suffix *ment*. Manage originally comes from the Italian *maneggiare*, from *mano* which meant hand, and which comes from the Latin *manus*. *Maneggiare*, when used in the mid-16th century, originally meant: to handle, specifically, to handle or train a horse. Related is the Spanish *manejar*, meaning to use or manipulate. Other early uses of the word management

⁷ By vernacular, I mean the common, colloquial language used by people in everyday conversation.

⁸ Poerksen 2004: 62

implied manipulation or trickery⁹. Today, the meaning of management is up for interpretation. The management of workers is a role that can be hard to understand, and is far removed from these original definitions. A manager's job description will very rarely include the handling of horses, and while manipulative managers are certainly not unheard of, most managers will assure you that such practices are as far from their list of duties as horse training and handling are. In the ecological realm of invasive species management, management more often than not refers to the massacre of certain plant or animal species. However, several usages are not so clear. In Executive Order 13751: Safeguarding the Nation from the Impacts of Invasive Species, a Management Plan is revealed, but this plan encompasses many different ideas, including:

(1) provide institutional leadership and priority setting; (2) achieve effective interagency coordination and cost-efficiency; (3) raise awareness and motivate action, including through the promotion of appropriate transparency, community-level consultation, and stakeholder outreach concerning the benefits and risks to human, animal, or plant health when controlling or eradicating an invasive species; (4) remove institutional and policy barriers; (5) assess and strengthen capacities; and (6) foster scientific, technical, and programmatic innovation¹⁰.

While some ideas of what management refers to in this context can be discerned through the haze (ie: control of, minimization of, eradication of, education of, etc), when we reach to grasp for a concrete meaning, it is as if the word jumps away to signify something else altogether. It serves as a placeholder for whatever the management will be at any moment. We see also in these soundbites a handful of other plastic words (plan, information, health, etc) with obscure intonations that contribute to a generally vague intention for invasive species management.

Further, one need only look into another sub-discipline of science to be made clearly aware that management (as like any other plastic word) is a master of disguise, with multiple diverse personalities. In the realm of economics, for example, management will rarely, if ever, refer to eradication or minimization. We can see different implications for the word management in the Federal Trade Commission Draft Strategic Plan:

Major Management Priorities and Objectives: The FTC's management objectives are incorporated into Strategic Goal 3, Advance the FTC's performance through excellence in managing resources, human capital, and information technology. This Strategic Plan addresses priorities in areas of human capital management, information technology management and planning, financial and acquisition management, staff emergency preparedness, records management and ethics¹¹.

Here, the meaning of manage or management generally refers to stimulation, advancement, and encouraged growth, rather than minimization or eradication. In this comparison, these meanings of management contradict each other, deflating each antonymic meaning.

So, from these two examples, what could we conclude for a definition of management? Here, management means: More money; less plants.

Plastic words are siblings of scientific jargon, but not twins. Adoptees of science, they carry a weighted power of science, but are in fact weightless in meaning and signification. Weightlessly, they can be easily transported across radically different concepts, realms, or disciplines, and still promenade a sense of scientific power. Therefore, they neatly bridge the pseudo-objective world

⁹ Poerksen 2004: 62

¹⁰ Poerksen 2004: 62

¹¹ Poerksen 2004: 62

of science with the everyday, but they do so covertly and discreetly. They are single words with countless applications, eradicating or making obsolete their kindred synonym words or phrases. They erase history and context, because they replace more precise and accurate explanation with a solitary empty word—collapsing vast histories into definitive words. The way the words feel and sound, and the power they radiate are far more important than anything they might mean or suggest. This species of language, bloated with scientific authority, is yet hollow. Their effect is a camouflaged confusion; these words sound familiar, but can be so varied in meaning from context to context, that one cannot truly know what these words will mean at any given time. Because they lack consistent meaning, and are simultaneously used by experts or officials to describe, they make it so that one relies upon those experts in power to know and understand what is being said. They serve to evoke the taste of power rather than to clarify or explain.

Plastic words simplify, reduce, and homogenize language, decreasing its precision and contextual efficacy. These words have intruded into the common tongue, but do differ from that vernacular lexicon. While vernacular words similarly can have obscure, difficult-to-grasp meanings, the context surrounding any vernacular word will ground it. Plastic words can be slung repeatedly in a single context, and have varied meanings throughout.

What these plastic words mean is everything and nothing at the same time. What they mean is *science*. They mean *authority*. They mean *good*. They mean *believe this*. Using these words is to seem smart, elite, powerful, and correct. These words generate silence among recipients of the message—they do not offer room for contestation, conversation, disagreement, or alternatives, as they are all encompassing in their vapidness. The audience to this plastic tongue can do nothing but receive, absorb, and obey. Already alarmed by this silencing tendency of bureaucratic language in 1966, Situationist Mustapha Khayati describes, “[...] people no longer even need to talk to each other: their first duty is to play their role as receivers in the network of informationist communication to which the whole society is reduced, receivers of orders they must carry out”¹². This silence is a symptom of industrial language that is certainly not new, and things have only gotten worse.

In sum, plastic words are a species of tyrannical and omnipresent vocabulary that serve to establish a disguised discord between speaker, intention, and audience.

Development, for example, is a plastic word, and it bleeds easily into many disciplines, contexts, and realms. In psychology, there are step-by-step levels a parent is supposed to track to ensure that their child achieves the reassuring status of normal child *development*. A fetus physically *develops* in similar step-by-step levels. Building a building of apartment complexes is also considered *development*. Film *develops*. We can know and recognize the truth in these definitions. Development is the movement, growth, or act of becoming something bigger, better, something desirable. And yet, the original definition of develop comes from the French *developper* circa the 12th century, and it means: “to free (a person from something), to unwrap (something), to unfurl, open out (something)”¹³. Language itself is an amorphous entity. Like a river, it moves and changes, and routinely rewrites its course in increments. The development of the word development from its 12th century meaning to a modern understanding of the term itself is not to be scrutinized or critiqued, at least not by me. What makes this word, and all plastic words, so treacherous is their camouflage, and their chameleon application.

¹² Khayati 1966: 222

¹³ OED 2019

Development has many definitions, but above all it has a taste of something *good* that is *becoming*, for the general public or the casual observer. When something develops, we are made to believe it becomes better, more valuable, more usable. But this generally positive understanding of development neglects a darker history, a darker truth behind the word. We would do well to remember to ask: What is the fate of the un-developed, the under-developed?

On January 20th, 1945, Harry S. Truman created the word “underdeveloped” when referring to certain areas that make up more than half the world in his inaugural presidential speech¹⁴. In this seminal instant, a new way of seeing the world was born: the world’s population was set suddenly on course towards the ultimate goal of becoming developed. Today, under the banner of development, the United States legitimizes invasion and intervention of other countries and cultures under the guise, the euphemism, of *development*. For an example, we can refer to George W. Bush’s military campaign of Operation Iraqi Freedom, which deployed “some 140,000 U.S. troops deployed in Iraq, in addition to civilian experts and U.S. contractors, who provide substantial support to their Iraqi counterparts in the fields of security, governance, and *development*”¹⁵. Total number of Iraqi civilian deaths by violence from the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom through 2020 is 184,776 – 207,645¹⁶. As Poerksen writes: “With a word such as development, one can ruin an entire region”¹⁷. With a word such as development, the United States continues its massacre.

Their vernacular origins would seem to make plastic words the inverse of scientific jargon. Scientific jargon emerges from scientific language and rarely mingles with the vernacular, whereas plastic words emerge from the vernacular and comfortably infect both the vernacular and scientific tongue. Plastic words are general and vague, while scientific jargon is highly technical and specific. Terms in scientific jargon retain their meanings consistently in their context, while plastic words are malleable, morphable, and, well, plastic. However, while they appear dichotomous in these respects, their exclusionary effects are similar. They both abstract and distance. Plastic words and scientific jargon both describe terms that are hard to translate broadly and meaningfully. However, when we hear scientific jargon, we do not presume to understand it unless we are well oriented in the sub-discipline of that brand of scientific jargon. Compared to scientific jargon, plastic words are a much trickier lexicon, largely because of their widespread use. We tend to think we know what plastic words mean. They hide in plain sight. Plastic words act as the abstracting language of that which rules the world. Scientific language is made intelligible by both a scientific technical tongue of jargon, whose history is steeped in intentional obfuscation, and these imprecise, interchangeable, *progressive* plastic words.

Plastic words are an amorphous chameleon zombie language, promenading a promise of something that is *correct*. They are the writing on the walls of the tower of Babel, the language of the leviathan, and the native tongue of the machine. But they are not only omnipresent gibberish. Plastic words also serve as industrial capitalism’s armor, and are used to justify almost any action, even as it results in the abuse of people and planet.

Different languages offer alternative ways of seeing the world. There is a vast system of meaning, interpreting, and perceiving that exist uniquely within each culture and language. Each distinct language gives a wholly unique perspective. As we have already touched upon, histor-

¹⁴ Sachs 1999

¹⁵ Dale 2009: I (*italics mine*)

¹⁶ “Iraq Body Count” 2020

¹⁷ Poerksen 2004: 7

ically Latin was the preferred language of science. Today, English is the dominant tongue by which the story of science is told. English is so common in other countries that academic papers written in English will largely outnumber academic papers written in other country's own languages. A *Research Trends* study from 2012 has found that 80% of over 21,000 articles coming from 239 different countries were written in English¹⁸. Today, not only is there less room for other languages in the sciences, but also they are fading away, dying off altogether. They are going extinct. There are approximately 6500 languages spoken today, but most are tucked away in little distant corners of the world. About 2,000 of extant languages are spoken by less than 1,000 people. It is believed that within one hundred or two hundred years, global language count will decrease to just a few hundred¹⁹. Can it be determined that the English language dominates and colonizes, as it sweeps across the world? Poerksen tells us that "Five languages cover almost half the earth, a hundred languages almost all of it. The universalist orientation to the nation state destroys the diversity of living languages. But even these triumphant languages are not the peak of the linguistic pyramid"²⁰. It is not just English sitting atop this linguistic pyramid, Poerksen warns us. "The peak is comprised of that small and spreading international vocabulary of a hundred, or fifty, or fifteen words..."²¹. He is speaking, of course, of the tyrannical plastic words, the lexicon of industrial civilization which sit atop, dominate, and infect languages, across borders and cultures²².

Industrial civilization seeks to replace the myriad tongues and words of the world with one globalized machine language that says "I am". A machine language that says nothing and means everything. Wiping out other words, other cultures, making them obsolete under the banner of *development* allows but a single narrative of development to flourish. The road to scientific knowledge is littered with wide-eyed corpses—other ways of seeing. This machine language would have us synonymize an indigenous way of knowing with obsolete belief systems in order to negate and destroy the ontological competition. And in this, we are made to forget that the knowledge of industrial civilization was itself born from a "local system, with its social basis in a particular culture, class and gender. It is not universal in an epistemological sense. It is merely the globalized version of a very local and parochial tradition"²³. It is this misappropriation of knowledge whereby we are made to believe this globalized western thinking is, has been, and always will be universal. But let us remember, it has not been, and will not remain!

Scientific knowledge replaces the names of places, plants, and animals with GPS coordinates, nonsense abbreviations, and dead Latin words. Global capital puts forward words like *sustainable development*, and *scientific progress* as it genocides the language of the indigenous community, as well as its people.

It is out of an elitist desire for hegemony that scientific language was born. Its origins and foundations sought to exclude the commonality, and the commonality is, as it has always been, left vaguely wondering: What is it that is being said here? What is it that is being *done*?

¹⁸ Poerksen 2004: 2

¹⁹ Sachs, 1999

²⁰ Poerksen 2004: 2

²¹ Poerksen 2004: 2

²² It is interesting to note that Uwe Poerksen's *Plastic Words* was written originally in German, and his "discovery" of these words occurred when he attended a talk on the necessity of *development* in Latin American countries. The talk was in Spanish. These words seem to bleed into both a wide variety of disciplines as well as other languages with colonialist intention and unsettling ease (not to mention common conversation!).

²³ Poerksen 2004: 7

But these are not the questions that we should asking. The questions we should be asking are, and have always been: Why is this so? How does this continue to be? And, *what else* can be done?

We have touched on and tasted the answers to why this is so, and how this continues to be. What remains is what can be done.

What can be done?

In the end, this is a problem of culture. Unlike jargon, these words are not exclusive to the scientists. Plastic language is not just another tool for the geneticists, the chemists, the ecologists, the biologists. The plastic tongue is rooted in the mouths of politicians, of lawyers, of journalists, of teachers, of students, of baristas, and retail workers, and nannies, and dish washers. Of children and of adults. These words are perilous, omnipresent, and they are often found even on the tip of your own tongue.

To discourse, argue, or converse in these terms is to concede to something you may not be consciously conceding to. When there is concern over normal and abnormal sexuality, we concede that our bodies must have a sexuality. When we debate about what is good or bad development, we concede to the development of the world. When we explore good or bad management techniques, we concede to be managed. When we talk about dignified or undignified work, we concede that we have to work. Plastic words are logical fallacies, tautological linguistic riddles with a lost beginning and no end in sight. They do not invite an answer, because they *are* the answer.

These words are the ontology of industrial society which paint a picture of the world that is to be stripped of its natural resources, to be dominated by human beings and by poison, and to project us into a technocratic and capitalist hellscape of an armored, onward, forward barreling progressive development, one that is commonly referred to as universally desirable economic growth. This lexicon paints a picture of the world that seeks to carve us into digestible, interpretable data, that wants to police our bodies, our minds, and our spirit.

These words are the names of concepts not to be questioned, but to be categorized, compartmentalized, studied, and praised, and when these words so smoothly slip off our tongues, we are made to play our part in a linguistic concession of these ideals of industrial civilization. The world we are made to see is painted by these words. At every level, these words and what they stand for are taken for granted as how the world really is. When something is this unquestionable, it becomes a cultural truth.

What can be done?

This essay offers the preliminary tear into the veils of this dead machine language that massacres us and renders us blind and subject. This essay isn't an answer, but it should serve to remind us that this is a *linguistic pandemic*. The language it uses, the narratives it speaks to us, and the world these words weave is surreptitiously infectious, and is an illness that we would do well to heal from. This essay reminds us that these words paint just a single picture, weave just a single world, tell just a single story that is but one way of seeing, and it is a way that is false, forged, and temporary. This is the lexicon of industrial civilization's story, a story of its own importance and infallibility. And this is a story that can be rewritten.

What can be done?

We can challenge that story of industrial capitalism, and we can challenge its favorite words, cast them aside, contest their incontestability. To challenge that story is to begin to rewrite it.

What can be done?

What we can do is begin to ask other questions. We can ask: What other words are possible? We can ask: What other worlds are possible? What we can do, in response to these questions, is to begin to come up with answers.

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originally published in Oak Journal #2, October 2020

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