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Television reporters communicate clearly, but not always in English

By Diether Haenicke
March 04, 2009

While I am pedaling away in the health club, I usually watch the daily news.

Riding a stationary bike for half an hour is pretty boring and, like most people who need to exercise but don't delight in just flexing their muscles, I watch television to pass the time.

I used to follow the stock exchange on TV, but terminated that practice when watching the economic reports became more painful than the simultaneous physical exercise. Now I listen mainly to the news, which leads to many interesting observations on linguistic changes in the use of words, but also to sporadic distress caused by the occasional sloppy speech habits of reporters and the people they interview.

When the levees were beginning to break in New Orleans, a Fox News reporter advised us that "there is no telling how many days this issue will be going on for."

Later, the Secretary of Homeland Security followed up with what needed to be done to "dewater" the city -- a linguistic shortcut for "pumping the water out" or "to drain." A few weeks later, a CNN reporter let us know that "Wilma is already half-way across the state of Florida when it comes to east-westwise."

I understand what these people are saying, but is it English? Here I expose myself to the corrections of my friend, a professional linguist, who categorically insists that there is no such thing as "correct" speech, and that as long as the intended message is transmitted and understood, communication has been established, and that is all that counts.

To me that is the equivalent of eating mashed potatoes with your fingers. As long as the food gets into your mouth, your hunger is satiated, and that is all that counts. While this may hold

true for some, it still is no pleasure to sit with someone who makes a mess of his food, and I feel similarly about people who make a mess of our language.

The breaking of a dam is not an issue; it is a disaster, a catastrophe, an accident or a tragedy. But the word "issue" has taken on a new meaning in recent years. Somebody who beats his wife nowadays has issues. A child who steals and lies has issues. Two office workers who can't stand each other have issues with one another. The Western Michigan University Computing Center informs employees that the university is "experiencing an issue with receiving e-mail from outside WMU." Oh, horror!

The word "issue" has many meanings, but mainly it is understood to mean a point or matter of discussion, debate, or dispute, such as legal, moral, or political issues. The way the word is used now, the speaker wants to avoid saying "problem." Problem is a harsh word, it may offend, and in our modern world where nobody wants to be called judgmental, we seem to prefer the non-judgmental vague and opaque expressions to the potentially offensive but precise and exact ones. So wife beating, stealing and lying become issues and are no longer big, fat problems or disasters.

When the Homeland Security secretary wants to dewater New Orleans, he borrows from the airline industry which enriched our language with the word "deplane." This led to such insincere words as "departicipate," which wants to take the sting out of quitting, and the linguistically doubly monstrous "deincentivise."

One does not expect linguistic grace and polish from government officials, but one does not dewater a city. Here creativity goes too far. Will we soon no longer dismount a horse but dehorse it, or decar our automobiles?

And last: The curious appendage of "wise" is to me another sign of inelegant patter, although widely used. "How are you doing money-wise?" and "Weather-wise our vacation was wonderful," are heard and unfortunately accepted all over. And how about this statement made by an acquaintance the other day: "In his second marriage he is doing much better wife-wise"?

Yes, I understood exactly what he meant. Communication occurred; the message reached me loud and clear. But was it English? As I listened to that sentence, I had the mental picture of someone stuffing mashed potatoes into his mouth with his bare hands, and it didn't look pretty.

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