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PASSING SENTENCE ON SENTENCES*

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In his book, *The Art of Plain Talk*,¹ Mr. Rudolf Flesch makes many assertions which seem convincingly plausible on the face of them, but which prove to be oversimplifications or plain distortions of fact if one troubles to look beneath the surface. Good examples are the comparisons he is fond of drawing between English and other languages. He tells us, for instance, that Modern Persian "has done away with articles," and admires that as "exactly the same simplification [that] is being used today by our headline writers." Now of course the telegraphic style of newspaper headlines serves its purpose well enough most of the time, but it is frequently misleading as to the real content of the news, and occasionally produces amusing ambiguities. English has no monopoly on this telescoped style, and some languages are better equipped to handle it than ours is. As for "doing away with articles," the gradual evolution of the function of the definite article in modern languages is a very interesting study which we cannot go into here. It has, however, made possible easy precision of expression for shades of meaning difficult to express otherwise.

Mr. Flesch says that "the fundamentals of language and the psychology of human speech are the same everywhere; and if one country adopts a practical, simple linguistic device, it might well be transferred to another language." This *sounds* reasonable; the only thing wrong with it, I think, is that it just doesn't happen to be true. Different languages are different *systems*, each of which you have to understand as a unified whole. You can't just transplant an idiomatic device from one language into another which habitually handles ideas in other ways. That is why literal translations commonly produce something which does not belong to any real language at all.

"Let's start with Chinese," says Mr. Flesch. After declaring that he doesn't "know any Chinese," he refers to it repeatedly as his ideal of simplicity, "the simplest of all languages." But there are different kinds of simplicity. When you try to "simplify" an idea that inherently is not simple, you immediately get into complications. It is all very

1. Rudolf Flesch, *The Art of Plain Talk*, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1946.

* Talk given at meeting of the American Business Communication Association, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, New York, April 20, 1968.

well to play around with such newspaper-headline examples as he uses for his argument, "dog bites man" or "man bites dog," but they do not get us very far.

I think Mr. Flesch's avowed unfamiliarity with Chinese is already being demonstrated near the beginning when he says, "it so happens that their language does not have the *r* sound." Actually it occurs in very common Chinese words.

"There are no words," he says, "of more than one syllable." To be sure, a written Chinese *character* represents only one syllable, but by no means is it necessarily a complete word, and the language is crowded with compound words, many of them for ideas which *we* express with one-syllable words, and some of them seeming redundant from our point of view.

He calls Chinese a "grammarless" tongue. Now it is true enough that our classification of "parts of speech" simply does not fit Chinese, even for so basic a concept as that of verbs. Its classes of words are not the same as ours. Therefore it has to use all sorts of devices that our system does not require. Mr. Flesch says that it has "no persons, no genders, no numbers." It expresses person and gender clearly enough, and its handling of numbers is refined with complications far beyond ours. We can say, for instance, two men, two books, two sheets of paper, two pieces of candy, et cetera, using simply the same *two*, but in Chinese the expression of measure has to be quite different, and there is a whole collection of such categories which for us have no logical meaning whatever.

He seems to think that Chinese employs no prefixes or suffixes. In the *spoken* language it certainly uses them, including some that are quite untranslatable. In writing, this fact is disguised, since each *syllable* requires a separate character as if it were a distinct word, as very often it is not at all.

With evident admiration, Mr. Flesch informs us that "the main principle of modern Chinese is exactly the same as that of modern machinery. It consists of standardized, prefabricated, functionally designed parts." It is "an assembly-line language." Now, insofar as that may be true, I think it is the greatest weakness of Chinese. It lacks flexibility. Languages go along with kinds of civilization, with whole ways of life. The Chinese seem to think in terms of ready-made clichés. There is a proverb for everything, and that takes care of it. Individuality is not valued, nor is the stereotyped individual human life. Insofar as China has moved out of an age-old static condition, it has been by the influence of those of her nationals who have learned

western languages and with them a new freedom of thought. Chinese is indeed a wonderful language in many ways, but Mr. Flesch admires it for the wrong reasons. Let us forget about Chinese as a model for English.

Of course Mr. Flesch is thoroughly justified in his rebellion against "gobbledegook"—he claims to have invented the name. What it boils down to is the abuse of technical-sounding words when no technical meaning is involved. It is a vicious tendency of much modern writing, but it is nothing new, only more exaggerated. There is nothing peculiarly American about it. It was ably satirized many years ago by a British literary critic, nothing in whose writing suggests any awareness of the existence of America.²

Mr. Flesch has little use for literary critics or for conventional textbooks. With scorn he quotes from a book on English usage an example given to illustrate the virtue of "compactness":

"The sentence *She ran down the corridor in haste* may without the slightest loss of meaning be more economically stated thus: *She ran down the corridor hastily*."

"That's economy for you," he comments: "two syllables made into three, and the colloquial *in haste* replaced by the literary *hastily*."

Here I think his labels are altogether arbitrary. Neither of the expressions is, in my view, either "colloquial" or "literary." They both belong equally to plain language. In a given sentence one may fit more easily and naturally than the other. Would he call it being "literary" to say, "These notes were hastily prepared." ? He seems to me to miss, however, the real point of what is wrong with the textbookish illustration. In dreaming up examples for handbooks to illustrate this or that, people seem to forget sometimes what the words actually mean. Can anyone imagine the girl *running* down the corridor slowly, carefully, or deliberately? For a real touch of "compactness" the sentence might have been made: *She hastened down the corridor*, and that might have been a truer statement than the mention of real *running* anyhow.

Really, however, Mr. Flesch is no true partisan of "compactness." On the contrary, he advocates what some of us look upon as wearisome wordiness. "The secret of plain conversational talk," he explains, "is not difficult ideas expressed in easy language, it is rather abstrac-

2. R. W. Chapman, "The Decay of Syntax," in *The Portrait of a Scholar*. This and other essays were written "in camps and dug-outs and troop-trains" while the author, an Oxford graduate, was in active service as a British artillery officer in Macedonia during World War I.

tions embedded in small talk. It is heavy stuff packed with excelsior. If you want to be better understood, you don't have to leave out or change your important ideas; you just use more excelsior. It's as simple as that."

In his examples of what he calls "plain talk," in which, as he says, "filler words are freely strewn about," the rather obvious fact is that the speaker has not yet quite made up his mind what it is that he wants to say. We can forgive such fumbling in casual conversation, but it is surely no virtue to be cultivated in what is supposed to be serious *writing*.

Mr. Flesch is thoroughly right in emphasizing punctuation, which he considers "the most important single device for making things easier to read." Unfortunately in his conception it is entirely bound up with the matter of *pauses*. So it was, to be sure, in the beginning, back in the days when "reading" always implied reading *aloud*, and it was by *hearing* that you understood. For the modern rapid silent reader such punctuation is merely an annoyance. Insofar as it is discriminatingly used, modern punctuation has a different function from marking "pauses"—which might be made almost anywhere for rhetorical effect in oral reading. What modern punctuation does is to keep the sentence-structure clear as one goes along, for the innocent reader who does not know what is coming. Without it, as often happens in such carelessly punctuated material as most newspapers, the reader is often likely to lose the pattern of the sentence and have to backtrack. We may suspect that many readers never bother to figure it out, but leave the idea vague or confused as it seems, and keep on going.

What Mr. Flesch says about the use of semicolons more or less fits the old-fashioned rambling sentences with a semicolon thrown in once in a while instead of a comma, just for variety. In his own writing he generally follows the increasingly definite American usage, which has nothing to do with the mere *length* of sentences. The semicolon is used where one could use a period so far as grammar is concerned. It comes between complete sentences closely related in thought, characteristically statements of the same idea in different terms in order to emphasize it:

"You don't have to worry about me; I can take care of myself."

"There was no use waiting for reinforcements; they could not possibly arrive in time to help."

It would take much too long to consider all the things that Mr. Flesch undertakes to deal with in his treatise on *The Art of Plain Talk*.

Many of his ideas are demonstrably sound, as they have been through the ages. Some of his statements seem like pearls of wisdom, as for instance:

“People are not just plain dumb; they may have little book learning, but they usually have a great deal of sense. [Incidentally a perfect example of modern use of the semicolon.] For instance, they have sense enough to resent empty phrases, to laugh at phony stories, and to recognize folksiness as a fake.”

I do hope he is right.

We cannot agree too much with his castigation of gobbledegook or pointlessly “fancy” language. Victor Hugo disposed of that in 1848 in classic verse which can stand for all time:

“Guerre à la rhétorique, et paix à la syntaxe.”

Let us wage war against high-sounding terms for simple things, but keep peace with grammar. The latter is the soul of language, *any* language, its developed system for orderly, coherent combination of ideas. That side of the coin Mr. Flesch is not seeing clearly when he expostulates against *his* notion of “grammar,” which he disposes of as “nothing but rules set up by schoolteachers to stop the language from going where it wants to go.” In his own writing he is regularly correct in grammar; of course he is, because he is expressing his thoughts in coherent fashion. Bad grammar is always some sort of confusion.

What I wish to discuss particularly, however, is the idea which Mr. Flesch appears to emphasize above all else, namely the desirability of keeping sentences *short*. He lays down as a rule: “Try to keep sentences under twenty words, certainly under twenty-five words.” The ideal length for a sentence, he believes, is 17 words. “Easy prose,” he says, “is often written in 8-word sentences or so.” Now, whatever statistical data he or anyone else may be able to muster in support of such declarations, I think this is not the proper approach.

Mr. Flesch says that the average sentence in his book has 18 words. If he has counted them all, I’m willing to take his word for it, but I consider the matter of no importance in itself. Here is a sentence of his which seems to me as easy to read as any in the whole book:

“After you have read a dozen or so books on style and writing, you get tired of such general suggestions and impatient to know just how you go about being simple, how you can make sentences short, and how you can tell a familiar word.”

That sentence contains 45 words. It is easy to find others more than twice as long as his 17-word norm. A sentence which he quotes with

admiration from Stevenson's *Treasure Island* contains no less than 55, and various sentences of his own in comment on the story run into the 30's. This is not to say that they are not good sentences; my very point is that they are. His practice is better than his preaching.

A person who uses *only* short sentences is bound to become tiresome in a short time. The sentences will look as if they were all of the same sort, equally important, equally emphatic, instead of performing the different kinds of functions which naturally require continually varying numbers of words. With one short sentence after another after another, not only is there the wearisomeness of monotony, but the reader is made to do the work that the writer should do for him, namely figure out the *relationship* of these disjointed statements, which is not expressed and may not be very intelligibly implied.

At the ABWA Convention in Washington a few years ago, one of the speakers told us very interestingly how ghost-writers go about their work. The ghost-writer studies carefully the characteristic tone of language and rhythm of speech of each client, so that the address he prepares for that person will seem to ring true. Now I remember reading somewhere not long ago a statement by someone who had prepared speeches for the late President Kennedy. The speech-writer found his task difficult, he said, because of the President's habit of expressing himself in "short, choppy sentences." Such a habit becomes a kind of bondage. When a person so habituated has to deal with an idea which inescapably requires a sentence longer and more intricate, he will be ill at ease in handling it. He can go astray in only slightly complicated sentences if he is accustomed to using nothing but the shortest and simplest kind of statement. So in an interview on September 2, 1963, President Kennedy said: "I don't think *that* unless a greater effort is made by the Government of South Vietnam to win popular support, *that* the war can be won out there." Obviously he did not, from the start, see the sentence pattern as a whole. Had he done so, he would have been likely to make a clearer, more orderly, and stronger statement by putting the "unless" clause in the beginning. Instead he sandwiched it awkwardly in the middle, and forgot that he had already begun the "that" clause which is the object of "don't think."

The fundamental fallacy in any attempt at mathematical calculations about words is that they are about as far as possible from being anything like standard equal units. Within immeasurable limits, they vary in their importance from one sentence to another, and in their functions in the different phrases or sentences into which they fit.

In fact, Mr. Flesch's own idea about putting in filler or "excelsior" to make reading easier—thereby actually lengthening sentences without addition of anything meaningful—indicates something about sentence-length as a criterion.

No doubt we can safely say that a sentence should not be longer than it needs to be. What it needs for a given purpose, however, is often more than mere down-to-earth clearness in presenting a simple fact or idea, as may be done by a terse telegram that is hardly English at all.

The typical function of a short sentence is a simple, definite *assertion*. We see this reduced to lowest terms in *yes* or *no*, which can be defined only as the equivalent of a complete sentence. What the simple, short sentence can *not* do is to combine facts or ideas into a unified pattern, in which not only are some more important and some less, but the kind of relationship they have to the central idea is clearly shown.

One of the most celebrated statements ever made about reading is that of Francis Bacon in his essay, "Of Studies," published in 1597:

"Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested: that is, some books are to be read only in parts; others to be read, but not curiously; and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention."

Grammatically of course this is two independent sentences; in modern punctuation they would be separated by a semicolon. In keeping with the practice of his time, Bacon used a colon and two semicolons, besides five commas. The whole thing, however, is simple enough. The idea is first presented in a figure of speech and then translated into literal terms. Yet it remains, after all, only an *assertion*. It asks to be taken on faith.

It could just as well stand as two separate sentences. Then the first, containing only 18 words, would fall neatly within Mr. Flesch's prescription. The second, which begins to make an application of the metaphor, takes 30 words. If he had gone on to *demonstrate* the truth of his assertion, by giving examples and showing why they belonged in their respective classes of books, he would surely have been drawn into sentences of considerably greater length. The quality for which Bacon's writing is always praised is *conciseness*, and that quality it certainly has. It is also bound by the limitations of this compact style. The statement we have quoted wins us by devices of rhetoric, perhaps partly because it may seem to excuse much of the careless

and superficial reading we know we have often done. It leaves us with no way of knowing which books he has in mind for each of the three classes so neatly set off from each other.

Bacon was outstanding because other prose writers of his time could be just as vague in abstract generalization without the conciseness which makes his statements stick in the reader's mind. Typical of 16th-century hit-or-miss looseness was the style of Robert Burton, whose *Anatomy of Melancholy* was first printed a quarter-century after Bacon's essay. He displays all manner of classical *scholarship* with no classical *discipline*. He writes almost interminable sentences without plan, verbose, prolix, rambling, incoherent. Such writing shows how far Francis Bacon was ahead of his time in the structure of English prose.

A study of the historical development of sentence-structure in English should cure anyone of nostalgia for imaginary "good old days." For that matter, I disagree with the English critic to whom I referred earlier when he said that "written English reached its highest general level in the latter part of the eighteenth century." His point is in the words "*general level*," by which he meant that the prose of humbler contemporaries was really not much different from that of the outstanding eighteenth-century men of letters. My impression is that he overstates the case. In our time when any sort of writing—good, bad, or worse—can get printed, we see all the faults which he deplored. Nonetheless it seems clear to me that the *best* modern American writing is the best English there ever was. The *best* of our modern writing, I said.

It is really ironic, however, to find inexcusably bad writing in writing about writing. Here I turn for instance to a recent article by a college professor on "Improving Children's Writing." It contains some interesting and practical ideas, but it is marred by things that ought not to happen. Let us consider this two-sentence paragraph. The first sentence reads:

"Many of the preceding statements on the possible causes of children's inability to write well either state directly or imply a *lack of guidance and direction*."

Then follows this sentence:

"Beyond these . . . (to what does "*these*" refer—statements, causes, or perhaps *lack of guidance and direction*?) But let us see where it leads us.

"Beyond these, the *failure* (this is the subject, *failure*) to work directly with a child on his writing, to help the class write

a group composition, to provide the encouragement needed, and to properly recognize (*sic*) differences in children's abilities and interests *indicate* a lack of proper teacher guidance and direction."³

He used a plural verb with a singular subject because he had forgotten what the subject was. This and other details are symptoms of looseness in a larger way. What it adds up to is a statement that in addition to lack of guidance and direction there is a lack of guidance and direction. But the fact that the sentence uses 45 words is merely incidental.

There can be no argument against short sentences as such. In the right sort of place they can be wonderfully effective. For an example I can think of none better than what I consider one of the best advertising slogans I have ever known, one which has been used for many years: "Burpee's seeds grow." Like short sentences in general, it is a simple assertion, to be taken on faith, but it completely covers what the seed-buyer is interested in knowing. Very different, however, are countless situations, confronting us continually, which call for much more sophisticated handling and therefore inevitably require sentences of considerable length. That does not mean that the sentences are harder to read. If the writer has a coherent pattern for his sentence as a whole, knows where he is going, and stays on the track, the sentence will not be made difficult reading by the mere number of words. Abundant examples are to be found on all sides. Here is one taken almost at random from a newspaper article:

"What does demean us is to watch what is happening to our own priceless environment—the raping of the last of our deep and silent forests, the shame of our great and silent rivers, the mutilation of our landscape—and to do nothing or perhaps engage in a few cheap, piddling efforts, contemptibly impotent, to save them."⁴

That sentence contains 57 words.

To offset any unkindness I may have seemed to show toward people writing about writing, I may quote from a recent publication addressed to teachers of composition in high schools and colleges:

"The precariousness of our daily success, the recurrent need

3. Walter T. Petty, *Elementary News*, pub. by Allyn and Bacon, Inc., No. 2, 1967.

4. *The New York Times Magazine*, May 28, 1967, p. 68.

to adapt to new crops of students, the annually renewed search for the better way to bring our points home to students, to have them see where what they have written succeeds or fails and why, or hear the reverberations of what they have read—these are a part of what we mean when we say that teaching is an art, not a science.”⁵

That sentence contains no less than 73 words. I do not believe it could be shortened without material loss.

I think there is hardly anything more inimical to really good writing, and especially to improvement in it, than the adoption of any particular manner of expression for general, indiscriminate use. That is what it is to cultivate a “style,” which is a form that the writer arbitrarily imposes upon his subject-matter. The good approach is rather at every point to look into the nature of what is to be expressed, and to be governed by that. It will result in sentences widely varying in length. The pleasing quality of variety, so important to sustaining interest, will thus be achieved almost automatically. As Mr. Flesch likes to say, “It’s as simple as that.”

5. *Exercise Exchange*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., Nov. 1966—April 1967.