



Telecom Australia

Minute

File Y30/1/15

Subject : MIND YOUR LANGUAGE

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From G. ROSMAN

To MR. F.W. ARTER

Some say that following the incorporation of fire, the wheel, and language into daily life, there was little need for further innovation. Beside these, all further inventions and discoveries can be dismissed. Now whereas we are all warned as children that fire is a good servant, but a bad master, and that it is the nut that holds the steering wheel that's important, little is said about keeping control of the language. We must be on our guard against arguments and modes of thinking creeping into the language itself and being locked there by continual repetition. The Womens Liberation Movement recognizes this point and has, as you know, been active in attempting to modify the language to suit its purposes.

At the Rotend meeting of the 10th of October it became clear that careful attention must be paid to the reporting of your discussions if many of the arguments are not to be mere reflections of the language. I encountered this phenomenon in another guise when, with John Craick, I was involved in writing a libretto for the New Branch. At that time we drew up a list of Inflected Descriptors, and a simple illustration follows.

I am resolute  
You are firm  
She or he is stubborn

Notice how these descriptions can fulfil certain basic needs in human relations. The first inflates the ego. The second is polite and conveys something wanting to be heard. The third conveniently splits the field into them and us. Now let me take an example applicable to the meeting.

I am an in-depth investigator  
You have more than a passing knowledge  
She or he is a narrow(minded) specialist

The last frequently occurs in the form of

She or he is a narrow technical specialist.

To avoid bias and to explore the language effect still further, consider an alternative.

She or he is a narrow specialist in social science.

SENT ON

Due to your conditioning you may find this sentence to have a rather odd sound, but persevere. Some may tell you that the study of humans in a social context cannot be narrow, but bear with me.

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In 1968 I was in Paris on official business and had the opportunity to experience a student uprising which had quite a measure of worker support. A major role in this action was taken by students of psychology, who plastered the walls of Nantes University with a poster having a format very similar to recommendations of the CCIR. An extract follows:

#### NOTICE

#### CONSIDERING

that psychology as such aims at the systematic subordination of individual behaviour to false social norms;

#### CONSIDERING

that psycho-sociology is nothing but justification of 'ideal' norms and a means of concealing the monstrous discrepancy between the ideal and the real;

#### CONSIDERING

that many students have embraced psychology in ignorance of its true nature, and because they are seduced by its professional glamour;

#### CONSIDERING

that they have been deceived by a form of obscurantism hiding under a ridiculous pseudo-scientific cloak, and representing a vicious assault on liberty;

The notice then called on them to abandon their studies of psychology.

You may perhaps take this as a rather biased view, but there are similar reservations held by the Science Task Force and social psychologists themselves (e.g. "Reconstructing Social Science" edited by Nigel Armistead 1974. Penguin Education series). So even if we admit some slight doubt as to the integrity of the discipline, there is the question of who will oversight the work and motives of psychologists and social scientists in such tasks as Action Research. Remember, it may have been a psychologist who started you smoking. One even came to Telecom from British Tobacco.

In the "New Scientist" of 4 October 1979 there is an item entitled "Last chance for Britain's engineers". This first of a series describes the progress of the Finniston inquiry and the evidence gathered. Later articles will cover the reactions of the institutions to the report. From what I have read it seems quite likely that a new term for engineer will be devised to overcome the present blurring in meaning. Your Rotend Committee may therefore find another reason to watch its language.

It could be some time before these articles appear on the library shelves, depending as it does on subscriptions being up to date and so on. The very journals you will hold in your hands may be on the water right now, steaming towards you. Meanwhile at 30,000 ft. the privately ordered subscriptions wing their way to laboratory staff. Perhaps you could paint this pretty picture for hanging in the library. We could call it ROTE and have a competition to find the role of the engineer, or whatever he will be called in the future.



Towards the end of the meeting there was a discussion around the term "flexibility". It was regarded as an ideal characteristic of TEND by a certain section. Let us inflect.

I am flexible  
You are open to argument  
She or he doesn't have a mind of her or his own.

In the course of that discussion you ventured to say, quite properly, that your personal feelings would enter any selection process. It was correct also of Mr. Demytko to warn of the dangers of attempting to draw up a specification of a human being. As the report of the Science Task Force put it concerning "immature and ineffective fields of inquiry".

"By this we mean fields which, for the time being or permanently, possess no corpus of certified knowledge. Such fields lack either 'facts' (accurate empirical observations) or a methodology for 'logically consistent prediction' or both. They are clearly beyond the purview of the scientific ethos, since they can satisfy the requirements neither of disinterestedness nor of organized scepticism. They include much of the 'social sciences' and of 'multi-disciplinary research'. The pretence of their practitioners that these fields are part of science may be, as Ravetz suggests, a device for survival, in the absence of which society would provide for these fields neither resources nor respectful attention.

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