

Wordlings in a Web 2.0 world

by Carolyn Lee

Abstract

Public language has become impoverished by 'managerialism' which frequently reduces language to strings of 'weasel' words, a phenomenon blamed on the information society. This process is not as ubiquitous or as inevitable as often represented, however. Drawing on Burke's notion of human beings as 'wordlings', I argue for the centrality of well-crafted words, especially on the Internet, and offer examples of language crafted with care and passion, leading to distilled and vivid expression. I use the term 'word bytes' for such language, as it can cut through the multiple items of information from many other media with which it is surrounded, and demand to be noticed and remembered. I conclude we do not have to accept the impoverished form of 'managerial' English, often produced by elites and used to justify the 'financialization' of the late capitalist world. We can begin to counter it by our own practices of using words with care and passion, and by disseminating our words. We can also stop and question 'weasel' language wherever we encounter it.

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Wordlings and 'word bytes'

I have long loved Kenneth Burke's definition of what it is to be human, reproduced below. Although he wrote it around the middle of last century, it seems as true today as ever. Note that he took care to include in his definition not only words, but also our 'symbol-making' and 'symbol-using' capacity. This allowed him "to encompass a wider range of phenomena than the purely linguistic ... systems of dance, music, painting ... [even] symbol systems not usually subsumed under the general rubric of

the humanities ... mathematics, computer programming, chemistry, and so forth." [1]
Burke "purposely chose the widest possible term, to include the widest range of
human phenomena." [2]

Being bodies that learn language
thereby becoming wordlings
humans are
the symbol-making, symbol-using, symbol-
misusing animal
inventor of the negative
separated from our natural condition
by instruments of our own making
goaded by the spirit of hierarchy
acquiring foreknowledge of death
and rotten with perfection [3]

As my title suggests, though, this paper is about the symbol system of words. My main interest is about the two ways in which humans use this system—writing and reading — and how best to fashion writing to make the reading experience as rich and rewarding as 'wordlings' need it to be. Although we now live in what is irrevocably an information society, where "information technologies based upon computer logic have networked our world" [4], the written word has defied all predictions and refuses to become obsolete, even in a world which now seems to many to privilege the image. We continue to need words, and always will. As Watson observes: "Pictures rule: but words define, explain, express, direct, hold together our thoughts and what we know. They lead us into new ideas and back to older ones. In the beginning was the Word." [5]

I agree with Watson that the written word — whether in print or pixels — is still of great importance to us 'wordlings', despite many of the contexts in which it is offered and received not having existed before, or having changed in radical ways in the last few years. The major change in our lifetimes — the Internet — has caused the proliferation of information on all facets of human existence — yet much of this is still disseminated via the medium of words. As a teacher in the Humanities, I might wish that much of this dissemination was more eloquent, or more logically argued; but as a citizen of a democratic public sphere, I applaud the ever-expanding range of voices now seeing the light of (pixilated) print. Of course, making it into print is one thing, gaining readers for our words is quite another. Increasingly, words that want to be noticed, I argue, need to be 'word bytes'.

'Word bytes' is a term I have coined to describe a certain type of writing, or rather to describe a quality possessed by writing that can get itself noticed, read, and retained by readers in contexts of information overload. The very phrase 'word byte' is a term which could only be possible in our current world — the information society. Most of us are now familiar with the term 'sound bite' — signifying a short pithy phrase or attention-grabbing sentence that will stay in people's minds, competing successfully against the million-and-one other pieces of information now bombarding us during most of our waking lives.

'Sound bite' is also often written as 'sound byte', a spelling in turn evoking one of the major elements of our lives now — the data transmitting information to our

computers, made up of zeros and ones in sequences. These sequences are usually counted in groups of eight, called bytes. The word 'byte' is short for binary digit eight. As I type these words on my keyboard, each stroke requires one byte of information (that is, eight bits). A three-letter word like 'bit' requires three bytes of information. So the term 'word byte' is a play on words since, in one sense, all words we write onscreen are 'word bytes' because in composing them we are required to transmit multiple bytes, even if we don't realize that's what we're doing.

Those of us who write because we need to or want to — for our education, for pleasure or creative expression, or for our work (and most occupations now requires writing of one sort or another) — hope our words will stand out from the vast array of competition. We hope that when readers' eyes scan over our writing, the words will function in much the same way as 'sound bytes' do. This means they need to be first noticed and to demand attention. Then they need to be retained in readers' minds, amid the multiple other stimuli. If they can do this, they will be functioning as 'word bytes'.

Some 'word bytes', as with 'sound bites', can be catchy simply because they are glib, not because they tell us anything new, or are crafted in subtle and interesting ways. But these will not stay in our minds, they will slip through in seconds, taking little foothold. The 'word byte' quality for which I am arguing is one where a great deal of meaning is condensed into few words, where there is an economical structure of expression, a certain nuanced style. Writing that takes fewer words to express its meaning is not necessarily inferior. Poetry is a case in point. Poems are language often distilled to an essence, and are not considered inferior to longer works. Nor do they automatically require a simpler vocabulary, although in itself a simpler vocabulary does not have to mean a simpler message. Think of William Carlos Williams' famous poem, 'The Red Wheelbarrow': "so much depends/upon/a red wheel/barrow" (Williams, 1986)

Depending on the physical situation in which our words are read, they often have to compete with multiple and multiplying items of information from many other media. The television or radio might be playing in the same room as the reader, or she might have iPod earphones in her ears. If she is reading the words on the computer screen, at any time an alert might sound, or a 'bubble' might briefly appear in the bottom of her screen, or both at once, informing her of the arrival of a new e-mail message. Her mobile phone could buzz or ring, and even the old-fashioned landline could join in the cacophony. This is no exaggeration, it happens to me on a regular basis. The other day it happened while I was talking to someone in a different (Australian) state, using Skype (Internet telephony), complete with headphones, and webcam.

So not only do our words have to garner attention in the first place, they have to retain a foothold in the minds of readers when so much else is clamoring for their attention. This is a reality of life in the information society. We can lament it. We can recognize it brings as many problems as rewards. We can even dub it the too-much-information society. But it is not going to go away. It is likely that in future we are going to become even more overloaded with information. And as every society brings forth certain specific skills for survival and success within it, the skills of gaining access to information, judgment and evaluation of it, management and production of it, are the key skills in the information society [6]. Even those people who produce words only for paper media still need to do their writing *in the context* of the surfeit

of information and communication with which their words must now compete for attention.

As Drummond asserts “we live in a Web 2.0 world” (Drummond in Lee, 2009). What he means by this is the rapid and ongoing development of technologies that have taken the Web to a whole new level of interactivity, enabling users to respond to content on the Web, and then to create their own, or to present the words of others in a new format.

Let’s take a look at some of these new forms of communication made possible by the information technologies in general, including Web 2.0: e-mail, chat and chatrooms, newsgroups, special interest groups (on, for example, photography), wikis, social network sites, blogs, discussion forums, Internet telephony and text messaging via mobile phones. Most of these communication forms involve the use of language forms that already existed before the Internet — in many cases the language of oral and even colloquial expression. While special abbreviations may be used, and even certain specific in-group vocabulary, as well as emoticons (for example, :-), most language on the Internet simply mirrors the type of in-group language occurring in face-to-face groups (the exception to this might be the conventions of mobile phone text messaging abbreviations). In addition, many of these media groups display language use every bit as stylish, rich, and compelling as writing previously valorized for these qualities in books and magazines. The best of this writing would qualify for my term ‘word byte’.

From user-generated words to Shakespeare’s sonnets

Below is an example of text functioning as a ‘word byte’, in the form of an extracted piece of user-generated writing from a communal photography site called Trekearth (<http://www.trekearth.com/>). Trekearth has as its mission, “Learning about the world through photography”; to this site, members can upload their photos, as well as explain the technical aspects of the photography, give a brief description of the depicted scene, and they may if they wish comment on the photographic qualities of others’ photos. Words or phrases from within pieces of text can be hyperlinked from one photograph to another, or to external sites — one of the best features of text on the Web.

The following description, taken from this site, accompanies a photograph of a very elderly man and woman on a street near a market, taken in June 2008 in the small town of Domme in southwest France.

“I first saw them while walking around the old covered market hall in Domme. There was something about their manner and earnest gesticulations which suggested they were not a married couple; their conversation seemed too animated, too urgent, somehow, and sure enough the gentleman eventually went on his way. I noticed the strong color of the motorbike, echoed

by the flowers in front of the window and beside the man, and decided to include these elements in the picture. The corner of the market wall on the right seemed also to give a suggestion of my eavesdropping on them, which is, I suppose, exactly what I was doing as I followed them for several minutes with my camera." (McRae, 2008)

This is an excellent example of a word byte. The verbal descriptions of the photographs on this website have to compete against the frequently compelling photograph for the reader's attention, and not all will win. I chose this excerpt because it starts in the middle of the action, a device — called *in media res* — said to have been recommended by the first century BC Roman poet Horace, and always a good method for gaining attention. The prose's informal, almost confiding, yet low-key tone gives a clear sense of certain identity behind the words, and is an example of what Drummond refers to as "personality-infused communication" (Drummond in Lee, 2009), an essential feature of successful Web 2.0 writing. The vivid visual descriptions in this piece, too, and the interesting word choices (earnest gesticulations, animated, urgent, echoed, eavesdropping, and so on), all add to its appeal.

As well as such purpose-written material, we also have access to excerpts through to entire oeuvres of the world's most acclaimed writers. To find a copy of Kenneth Burke's poem, I typed "Kenneth Burke" and "wordlings" into Google. Up came the results pages, and two clicks of the mouse took me directly to the poem, all achieved in under 10 seconds. Similarly, I typed into Google Shakespeare + complete + works, and clicked on one of the links that appeared, and found myself at the Open Source Shakespeare Site (<http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/>).

This site was constructed by an American marine reservist Eric M. Johnson, while serving in Kuwait in 2003, and later formed the basis of his MA in English at George Mason University. Johnson says his site "attempts to be the best free Web site containing Shakespeare's complete works. It is intended for scholars, thespians, and Shakespeare lovers of every kind. OSS includes the 1864 Globe Edition of the complete works, which was the definitive single-volume Shakespeare edition for over a half-century" (Johnson, 2009). Between typing the word Shakespeare and reading Sonnet IV, which contains one of my all-time beloved 'word byte' lines — "nature taketh nothing but doth lend" — around 10 seconds elapsed.

It took me a little longer — maybe three minutes — to find in electronic form a long-remembered poem from my favorite poet, Adrienne Rich, to read it, and then to copy and paste a few lines of it below:

'Living in Sin' by Adrienne Rich
She had thought the studio would keep itself:
no dust upon the furniture of love.
Half heresy, to wish the taps less vocal,
the panes relived of grime [Z]

I have gone to some lengths here, although without needing to expend much time on it, to show examples of beautiful, target-hitting language — one of the main qualities of a 'word byte' — all taken from the Web. True, two of these excerpts existed before

the Web's invention, but one (from the Trekearth Web site) was created especially for it, and was in fact typed directly into a box on the site, as is much language that is put on the Web by its users. Such users are often dubbed 'prosumers' because they are both consumers and producers of Web content.

So while it's true that the Internet's stock-in-trade is language [8], because of the enormous variety of language we can find there, the Internet is not a homogenous linguistic medium, and the often-heard term Netspeak [9] is too vague to be useful. If we are talking about all Internet language, then we would have to include the semi-literate or even ignorant ravings of some personal blogs, as well as the digital versions of Shakespeare. I don't believe a term exists that can meaningfully encompass these two extremes as there are many different genres of Internet language (each specific to its own discourse community), as there are genres of pre-Internet origin.

Netlingo as 'word bytes'?

We could, though, use the terms netspeak or netlingo to refer to words that have come uniquely from Internet or information technology usage, and have now entered common parlance. The word 'Photoshop', for example, while denoting a type of computer software for manipulating images, has recently been included as a draft entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Scanlon, 2008). But even earlier I came across 'Photoshop' being used as a verb in the following sentence (in an article discussing Photoshopped images on newsgroup Web sites specifically constructed to express hatred for Osama bin Laden): "Newsgroups probably helped a lot of people deal with the stress of September 11. But unless we want to add a whole host of other dreadful dates to our 'perpetual calendar of human anxiety' (Focillon), then we should spend less time demonizing the enemy, and more time Photoshopping a future we can all actually live in." [10]

Notice how the authors of this sentence used Photoshop in a metaphoric, or connotive sense, whereas the draft dictionary definition, or denotation is: "To edit, manipulate, or alter (a photographic image) digitally using computer image-editing software" (Scanlon, 2008). The metaphoric form of 'Photoshop' in the sentence where I first encountered it, is a good example of a 'sound byte', as it has remained in my memory for four years!

Google is another word that has entered the *OED* as a draft entry, in June 2008, "in recognition of our increasing reliance on the popular search engine for ferreting out information about people, places and things." As Scanlon further notes, these computer terms have been transformed by common usage from noun to verb, something not many technical nouns have done, perhaps only those signaling "unprecedented cultural changes". Of course, the phenomenon of proper noun-to-verb is not new. I'm reminded of the brand name of a popular vacuum cleaner first available in the fifties — Hoover; it was common to hear women (yes, in those dark ages, it was mostly women) speaking of "hoovering" their carpets. Perhaps such machines also represented an "unprecedented change" from earlier, more laborious methods of cleaning floors. Hoover, too, eventually appeared in the *OED*.

There are other new words spawned by the information and communication technologies, or used by certain specialist online communities — be it in denotive or connotive forms — such as *hardwired*, *B2B*, *javascript*, *jpgs*, *Mac*, *hardwired*, *mainframe*, *hacker*, *portal*, and so on. A staggeringly comprehensive list, including abbreviations used in text messaging, can be found at www.netlingo.com. Many netlingo terms can be used in ways that function as ‘word bytes’. Text messages, too, can be ‘word bytes’ of quite a different order from both specialist computer language, and the more common forms of written language. While there’s a view the abbreviation involved in texting is impoverishing the language, and lowering literacy skills, this is not borne out by the latest research from Coventry University in Britain. On the contrary, texting improves literacy because “before you can write and play with abbreviated forms, you need to have a sense of how the sounds of your language relate to the letters” (Crystal, 2008).

As Crystal argues, wordplay involving abbreviation is not a new phenomenon. He cites the example of a well-known riddle from at least the first half of the twentieth century: *YY U R YY U B I C U R YY 4 ME* (= ‘Too wise you are, too wise you be ...’). From much earlier, 1711 in fact, English writer Joseph Addison complained about how some words were being “miserably curtailed”, such as ‘*pos*’ (for positive) and ‘*incog*’ (for incognito); and ‘*cos*’ has been in the *OED* from 1828, and ‘*wot*’ from 1829 (Crystal, 2008)

Earlier, I mentioned the concentration or distillation of meaning into fewer words, the main quality of a ‘word byte’. Haiku, for example, is an extremely condensed form. Drawing on this idea, and no doubt intending to demonstrate that texting is not restricted to inane exchanges, for World Poetry Day in 2007, a U.K. mobile company ran a competition to find the best romantic poem in SMS. Entrants could use abbreviated and non-abbreviated words. The winning entry was as follows:

The wet rustle of rain
can dampen today. Your text
buoys me above oil-rainbow puddles
like a paper boat, so that even
soaked to the skin
I am grinning. [[11](#)]

But in a strange echo of eras prior to mass literacy, much communication in the information society now relies on visual media, surpassing text-based communication of any kind. Whether we consider modern hardcopy mass media, or the World Wide Web, it can often seem that pictures dominate, to the extent that words may even be seen as “parasitic on the image” (Barthes, 2000).

But only in certain communication situations, I would argue. The Trekearth site, for example, is more about images than words, so it is unlikely that all of the descriptions of the photographs are read. With online newspapers, even those of us who are avid readers would view far more images illustrating articles than we would read the actual articles. There is evidence that when we do read on the Web, it is often done in quite a different fashion from how we read books or other hardcopy (Drummond in Lee, 2009). But the Web would be much less interesting and informative without words. We are all wordlings, albeit in differing degrees, and our world’s conversion to an information society has not changed this.

Deathly words?

Watson, however, believes words are in danger. This is the central thesis of his book *Death sentence*:

"While English spreads across the globe, the language itself is shrinking. Vast numbers of new words enter it every year, but our children's and leader's vocabularies are getting smaller. Latin and Greek have been squeezed out of most journalists' English and 'obscure' words are forbidden unless they qualify as economic or business jargon. You write for your audience and your audience knows fewer words than it used to and hasn't time to look up unfamiliar ones. The language of politics is tuned to the same audience and uses the same media to reach it, so it too diminishes year by year. ... Like a public company, the public language is being trimmed of excess and subtlety." [12]

Watson terms this resultant, impoverished form of English 'managerial language' and argues it "may well be to the information age what the machine and the assembly line were to the industrial." [13] In other words, a form of monotonous enslavement. He calls the worst examples of this type of language 'weasel words'. Said to have originated in nineteenth century American politics, weasel words suck the meaning out of sentences in the way "a weasel sucks an egg dry, leaving its shell intact" (Woodhouse, 2008). President Roosevelt apparently used it to describe President Wilson's use of the term "universal voluntary training" for "conscription".

The concept of 'weasel words' has been used, too, by media critics, notably Stuart Hall and Norman Fairclough. For example, Fairclough argues that the British Labour Party's change of name to New Labour "wasn't just reflecting a shift in political ideology, it was manipulating language to control public perception" [14] He sees this as a new type of centralized control modeled on business, a form of control that involves language, especially the selection of "particular wordings, that will be most effective in achieving consent." [15]

Similarly, Watson argues that this 'managerial language', emanates from business and from politicians, before being reproduced in all forms of the media.

This reproduction is of course inevitable because the media, including the Web, "offer a home to all linguistic styles within a language" [16] And within this home we will find 'word bytes' as well as their opposite, 'weasel' words — examples of language with all meaning sucked out of it. As Crystal makes clear, there are many varieties of English in use, each governed by its own set of conventions; for example, legal English, religious English, academic English, in addition to the managerial English described by Watson.

We certainly do encounter far too much badly crafted language in many media, but I'm not sure whether the causes for it can all be attributed to the information society. I grant, however, that one might be tempted to think otherwise after reading some unmoderated, free-for-all, or even personal, weblog, full of badly-spelt inchoate ravings. Then again, why should such material be denied an existence, providing its

content does not contravene our society's laws? No one is forced to read anything. If the content of any media does not seem useful to us, we can move on, selecting other material.

The long centuries of elite gatekeeping, when only those with power or resources controlled what material was granted the oxygen of exposure, are thankfully over. And for every narcissistic rave couched in idiosyncratic spelling, or vast tract of managerial 'weasel' writing, there is available carefully styled, well-researched, reasoned discussion on the vital issues of the day. This material, often by unknown writers, could not have been available to a mass audience in any other era.

Significantly, as Watson demonstrates, the most deathly examples of English writing are produced by at least some of those with the most power and resources in society. Emanating first from business, and seeping into politics, the media, and "all kinds of institutions", it is the idiom of managerialism that has now become our public language [17]. But has it really? As a media researcher, I immediately want to do some empirical testing to see if he's correct. If I go to the homepage of my local newspaper *The Age* I can click on the link "Today's coverage". I can then click on two stories at random, and copy and save the first ten lines of each, to examine them in detail.

The first article, "US Climate Debate May be Sidelined" (Green, 2008) begins with the lines:

"An inconvenient truth, rarely mentioned in Australia's climate change debate, is that the effectiveness of any state-led response to the greatest challenge of the 21st century rests in the hands of two countries: America and China. Unless the two powers, which together contribute almost half the world's carbon dioxide emissions, can reach agreement on obligations to slash their emissions, there is scant hope that the international community will be able to stabilize atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gasses at a level that will avert disastrous consequences.

In recent statements of their respective China policies, both US presidential candidates have expressed a welcome willingness to work with China to cut emissions. However, the obstacles to achieving such agreement are large."

The author has begun his article with a double wordplay. The first is to echo the title of a recent and famous documentary about climate, *An Inconvenient Truth*, made by Al Gore. This echoing device is appropriate, given the similarity of the subject matter. The second wordplay involves a much-emulated syntactic mirroring of an opening sentence first made famous by Jane Austen. Austen's line begins "It is a truth universally acknowledged ..." [18] from her novel *Pride and Prejudice*. Although the tone of the article is one of objective "hard news", Green employs strong verbs

(slash, stabilize, avert) where he can, as well as the interesting adjective "scant"; there is also the alliteration of "welcome willingness". All in all, just in these eleven lines, I see an attention to detail that makes this piece of writing full of 'word bytes' with the capacity to capture attention. The argument has a strong chance of remaining in the reader's mind for some time, mainly thanks to the wordplays at the start. This is not prose "trimmed of excess and subtlety", and neither is it the language of managerialism.

We find a very different style, however, in the opening lines of the second of the three stories, "'New generation housing' can open doors for the marginalized":

"A key element in any strategy to alleviate homelessness must be an increase in the supply of safe and affordable housing. While federal and state governments are working to improve life for the marginalized — a federal white paper is due in October and a national affordable housing agreement is expected later in the year — there must be wider acknowledgement that it has become almost impossible for people who are homeless to find safe and affordable accommodation.

Agencies whose mission is to help the poor often have no alternative but to place people in private rooming houses where a couple must pay up to \$370 a week for a room no bigger than a standard lounge room — with no toilet, no kitchen and no money left at the end of the fortnight to even start to get your life back together.

This means people remain homeless for longer, and the longer you are homeless, the harder it is to get back on your feet." (Perusco, 2008)

This article opens with the dull, uninspired type of syntax often found in government or business press releases, and of which Watson complains. There is very little in the way of active verbs, and no actual 'characters' in the grammatical subject positions in the first paragraph. "While federal and state governments are working ..." is the nearest we get to 'characters' but they are cast in a dependent clause, not as the main characters in the subject position of the sentence. Indeed, there are no characters, as the main part of the sentence is "there must be wider acknowledgement that it has become almost impossible" Following Williams (1995), I have discussed elsewhere the increased readability of prose constructed in a 'character + action' structure (Lee, 2004).

At first glance it might seem the initial part of the article has emanated from a government media release, since a few days earlier the Australian government had introduced legislation to establish the National Rental Affordability Scheme. But while I found several press releases on this topic, I did not find one clearly identifiable as

the basis for this paragraph. I did, however, find the following on a government Web site:

“In March 2008 the Council of Australian Governments agreed to the key elements of a ground breaking new Intergovernmental Agreement on Commonwealth–State financial arrangements, which will be finalized by the end of 2008. The new financial framework will lead to a significant change to Specific Purpose Payments (SPPs) — which are payments made to the states and territories by the Commonwealth to pursue national policy objectives. The Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program (SAAP) is currently funded through an SPP.” (Australian Government, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs)

Although it is difficult to work out any clear meaning from ‘managerial’ prose like this, it does seem as if this unnamed government writer is trying to provide information on a new initiative. Characters of sorts have been constructed in this prose: “the Council of Australian Governments”, “the new financial framework”, and “the supported Accommodation and Assistance Program”. But these characters are insufficient to save the piece from turgidity. The prose tells of a world of agreements, arrangements, frameworks and programs, with not a human being, nor a ‘word byte’ in sight.

This is an example of business language that Watson argues “has spread through the pursuit of business models in places that were never businesses. ... It is the language of all levels of government They speak of *focusing on the delivery of outputs* and matching decisions to *strategic initiatives*. Almost invariably these strategic initiatives are *key strategic initiatives*.” [19]

The author of the article above actually begins by referring to the government’s initiative, using similar language to that of the government: “A key element in any strategy to alleviate homelessness ...”, but by the time he reaches the last two lines of his first paragraph, it is clear he is saying this new strategy is not enough to deal with the problem. The sentences in his second and third paragraphs are structured quite differently, though. There are no literary devices (it wouldn’t suit this subject matter), but there are characters and actions: agencies ... have ... to place people ... ; ... people remain homeless The writer now uses a lucid, unadorned but graceful style, to give readers a clear sense of the struggles of both the agencies and the homeless people.

Such sentences as these have a far greater chance of functioning as ‘word bytes’ and of having some impact on readers, than do sentences couched in the ‘managerial’ style prose quoted above (significantly, the writer of the article, Michael Perusco, is chief executive of Sacred Heart Mission in Melbourne, one of the agencies to which he refers in his article). It is difficult to understand why the writer began his article in ‘managerial’ language. Perhaps in his agency role he has to read a great deal of such language; or perhaps he wanted to begin in the terms of the government before

going on to make a very strong argument that the initiative proposed is simply not enough. It's a pity, though, that he did not commence with 'word bytes' because in its published form it would not invite busy, information-overloaded readers to proceed much beyond the first couple of lines, and therefore his important argument would be missed.

This is obviously not a representative sample of newspaper prose, but it does show how we can find examples of 'word bytes' quite easily, even though 'weasel' words are all too common. But while managerial language may be a modern phenomenon, lack of clarity has existed for a long time, perhaps as long as humans have been stringing words together.

Words in the information society

Turgid writing, for example, has been around for centuries. Williams quotes the following sixteenth-century example:

"If use and custom, having the help of so long time and continuance wherein to [re]fine our tongue, of so great learning and experience which furnish matter for the [re]fining, of so good wits and judgments which can tell how to [re] fine, have griped at nothing in all that time, with all that cunning, by all those wits which they will not let go but hold for most certain in the right of our writing, that then our tongue ha[s] no certainty to trust to, but write all at random." (Richard Mulcaster, *The First Part of the Elementary*, 1582)

Equally, writers have been producing clear prose for a long time, as well as giving advice *against* turgidity. The following example (also from Williams), is from 1553:

"Among all other lessons this should first be learned, that we never affect any strange inhorn terms, but to speak as is commonly received, neither seeking to be over-fine, nor yet living overcareless, suiting our speech as most men do, and ordering our wits as the fewest have done. Some seek so far for outlandish English that they forget altogether their mother's language." [20]

Clearly, anxieties about how we should best put words together are not new. But Watson's argument, that the present turgidity, and the "death" of subtlety and beauty in written English, is largely the result of the spread of 'managerial' language, deserves to be heeded. Why has managerial language proliferated? Earlier, I quoted Watson as saying this type of language has virtually taken the place of the machine and the assembly line — important elements of the industrial age.

This idea is congruent with the view expressed in Hassan's book *The Information Society* in which he states, "Information, in the form of ideas, concepts, innovation and run-of-the-mill data on every imaginable subject ... has replaced labor and the relatively static logic of the fixed plant and machinery as the central organizing force in society." [21] In particular, he argues that in our economic system (of neoliberal globalization, or late capitalization), every aspect of our lives has been "financialized." [22] By this he means financial knowledge is the main currency. In other words, the total dominance of the buying and selling of, as well as gambling with, money — paper capital not based on manufactured products or on anything real.

Such a 'hollow' economy would need its own type of language to try and justify its existence — weasel language. Look at just a few of Watson's examples of this: innovative and forward-looking; continuous improvement; growing (as transitive verb), as in growing your business, or growing the economy; stakeholders; bottom-line; productivity-driven; embedded, collateral damage; attrited; deconflicted (Watson, 2000). These words certainly resemble the hollow shells of eggs sucked dry by weasels, the name of the animal functioning as the metaphor Watson uses for business language — a 'word byte' if ever there was one!

This type of business language has likely spread its tentacles into all areas of society. Even if writers don't want to use it themselves, if they want to debate an issue with government or business they find themselves debating in the terms of their interlocutor, as did the writer of the article I examined earlier. The writer was not from business, but running a charitable mission, and therefore probably needing to deal with businesses regularly. In addition, as the 'financialization' of the world has increased in pace, the proportion of financial news in the media has grown. This has not necessarily been generated by journalists. Banks will offer to supply a news program with some expert commentary, and will fund the cameras and equipment necessary for the news crews to make this happen, complete with the bank sign or logo in the background (Radio 774, 2008). For newspapers, banks and financial organizations will send press releases — as do all businesses and anyone who wants to get material into the media-written to resemble news stories. In busy, short-staffed newsrooms, many of these press releases will go into print with minimal editing.

But as Deverell argues (Deverell in Lee, 2004), for every press release aimed purely to drum up business for a commercial enterprise, there is also one doing something helpful for the community. And I would add: for every sentence in the media written in 'weasel' words, we find one that is stylish and nuanced. These are the words that attract readers, and stick in their minds, no matter how much dross and distraction surrounds them.

Watson may well be correct in asserting that managerial language has infected every aspect of public language in the globalized information society, and has seeped almost everywhere, into:

"... both private and public sectors ... McDonald's, your financial institution, your library, your local member, your national intelligence organization. It comes through your door and down your phone: in letters from public utilities, government departments, local councils, your children's school,

banks, insurance companies and telephone companies" [23]

But with Hassan I want to argue strongly that "pessimism in theory as in life is a form of powerlessness." [24] Language is who we are, and we are language — wordlings indeed — and we *can* fight against its death by infection. In this case, the microbes come from neoliberalism, but they can derive just as easily from totalitarianism, as George Orwell showed long ago in his famous novel *1984*, which was as much about language as about society.

Industrial action — for 'word bytes'

Allies in this battle are not hard to find. Try talking to people who are influential in large enterprises; ask them — as I have — what they think of the language of most of their colleagues, or of the public language of their company. See if they are happy with it. Usually they are not. But often they don't know how to change it (perhaps show them with this article!).

Another thing you might try, when you need to get a point across to someone, and especially if it's someone in a large organization, is to write a letter. Write it in a well-judged and elegant way, taking time and careful thought to craft each sentence, construct ethos, pathos and logos [25], appropriate to the writer and the purpose. You can send it by e-mail or snail mail, but snail mail is best as it's now such a novelty. I always picture my recipients holding my letters in their hands, having to give them more attention than they would normally give an e-mail message, with all the other things on the screen distracting them.

Fewer and fewer people write or receive these sorts of letters now. The dominant view is that we must respond to almost everything by dashing off a quick e-mail (which can then too easily be ignored, anyway), or not stop to write anything at all, because there will always be something more pressing to do. Very little should be more pressing, I argue, than using language with care and passion, except perhaps talking to one's partner, friends, or children — but doing that is often about using language with care and passion too.

When I have good reasons, I write these sorts of letters — to mayors, colleagues, bosses, people high up in large enterprises. I don't always get the response I want, but I almost always get a response which shows the recipient has given my letter considerable thought. People are wordlings, after all, and will respond to words which have been put together with care, crafted to entice their intended reader to switch off from all the other information for a moment, and take the time to read these words. I have termed such words and phrases, that hit their targets, 'word bytes', not because I want such words to conform to the information society, but because I want language — stylish, sharp, carefully-constructed — to do battle with the 'decayed' language usually dashed-off in this speeded up world (Hassan, 2003), to take it on even on its own terms, and to win.

This endeavor need not be limited to personal or work-related letters: an e-mail

letter to an editor can also be a vehicle for well-crafted 'word bytes'; so can a comment or a post on a blog, or even your own regular blog; or a contribution to a special-interest site, of which the Trekearth example I quoted earlier is but one example.

We can also stop and question 'weasel' language whenever we hear it, as I have described radio presenter Jon Faine doing, elsewhere (Lee, 2007). As Fairclough (2000) demonstrated, it was a particular 'weasel' use of language by politicians and certain business leaders that presented 'neoliberalism' and 'globalization' as inevitable forces against which humans were represented as powerless.

As Burke has described in his poem with which I began, and elsewhere, humans are wordlings, we invented language. And it is language that constructs our reality: "We cannot look to reality to know what a word means; instead we must look at language to see what reality means. Words impose knowledge on us — they create a reality for us." Not all words we write or read can be 'word bytes', but we can certainly aim to eradicate 'weasel' words in our own writing, and to object to them strongly in the writing of others.

Although we live in an information society, or a Web 2.0 world, this does not mean we should forget we are first and last "bodies that learn language." [26] Language is what makes us human, and what makes the world intelligible to us. The quality of our world is shaped by the quality of the words around us, including every word we write, type, or speak. 

About the author

Carolyn Lee is a Lecturer in the Media and Communications Program at the University of Melbourne, where she researches and teaches media writing, and rhetoric. Her latest book is *Word bytes: Writing in the information society* to be published by Melbourne University Publishing in July 2009.

Notes

1. Jerry Ross, 1999. "Kenneth Burke's 'Definition of Human'," at <http://www.cla.purdue.edu/dblakesley/burke/human/symbol.html>.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Burke, 1989, p. 263.

4. Hassan, 2008, p. viii.

5. Watson, 2000, p. 65.

6. Livingstone, 2004, p. 3.

- [7.](#) Rich, 2002, pp. 9–10.
- [8.](#) Crystal, 2006, p. 271.
- [9.](#) Following “Newspeak”, Orwell, 2003.
- [10.](#) Clemens and Pettman, 2004, p. 91.
- [11.](#) Ben Ziman–Bright in Crystal, 2008.
- [12.](#) Watson, 2000, p. 4.
- [13.](#) Watson, 2000, p. 8.
- [14.](#) Fairclough, 2000, p. vii.
- [15.](#) Fairclough, 2000, p. 12.
- [16.](#) Crystal, 2006, p. 229.
- [17.](#) Watson, 2000, p. 2.
- [18.](#) The full line is: “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife”, the first sentence of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*.
- [19.](#) Watson, 2000, p. 13. Emphasis in original.
- [20.](#) Thomas Wilson, *Art of Rhetoric*, 1553, in Williams, 1995, p. 7.
- [21.](#) Hassan, 2008, p. 23.
- [22.](#) Hassan, 2008, p. 28.
- [23.](#) Watson, 2000, p. 16.
- [24.](#) Hassan, 2003, p. 128.
- [25.](#) Lee, 2004, p. 42.
- [26.](#) Burke, 1989, p. 263.

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Editorial history

Paper received 10 December 2008; accepted 20 January 2009.



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First Monday, Volume 14, Number 2 - 2 February 2009

<http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/2320/2094>



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Butzkueven, H;Kolbe, SC;Jolley, DJ;Brown, JY;Cook, MJ;van der Mei, IAF;Groom, PS;Carey, J;Eckholdt, J;Rubio, JP;Taylor, BV;Mitchell, PJ;Egan, GF;Kilpatrick, TJ

Title:

Validation of linear cerebral atrophy markers in multiple sclerosis

Date:

2008-02

Citation:

Butzkueven, H., Kolbe, S. C., Jolley, D. J., Brown, J. Y., Cook, M. J., van der Mei, I. A. F., Groom, P. S., Carey, J., Eckholdt, J., Rubio, J. P., Taylor, B. V., Mitchell, P. J., Egan, G. F. & Kilpatrick, T. J. (2008). Validation of linear cerebral atrophy markers in multiple sclerosis. *JOURNAL OF CLINICAL NEUROSCIENCE*, 15 (2), pp.130-137. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jocn.2007.02.089>.

Persistent Link:

<http://hdl.handle.net/11343/35071>