A NOTE ON FUNCTIONAL VOCABULARY
IN RHETORIC

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修辞学における機能語彙の選択と用法

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修辞学において，表現したいことがらのみを，むだな言葉を使うことなくずばり表現する技法を，機能語法と呼ぶ。言語学の分野において機能語と呼ばれるものは，ある文を構成するに当って文法的な（機械的な）機能を持つ単語のことを意味するが，修辞学では，文の内容を的確に伝えることのできる選び抜かれた語句を機能語彙と呼ぶ。従って，機能語彙は実質的なものであり，それを効果的に用いた文は単刀直入で簡単明瞭である。この種の文には，説明不足，あいまいさ，不必要な挿入句などは一切許されない。また，修辞学では，一つの単語を独立して取り上げて，それが機能語であるか否かという絶対的な判断はせず，文全体のバランスという中で，それが機能語として認められるか否かという相対的な立場をとる。そして，これらの単語が効果的に使用されているかどうかによって，その文あるいは文章の持つ説得力が決定されるのである。時によっては，このような語法は非文学的であるという非難を受けることもあるが，ピカソを始めとする偉大な近代画家達でさえも，皆，デッサンという基本技術の上に積み上げられた人々であるということを認識すれば，文に個性を持たせる前に，まず，機能語法という基本的な技術の習得が必要であることは明白となる。このような観点から，高等英作文の教授において活用することのできる，機能語彙の実例を用いた指導法の一例をここに掲載する。本稿では，機能語彙を，Ⅰ.抽象名辞と具体名辞，Ⅱ.一般名辞と特定名辞，Ⅲ.漠然とした表現，Ⅳ.あいまいな表現，Ⅴ.冗長という五つの角度から検討することを提案する。

INTRODUCTION

A functional vocabulary is one that fully accomplishes the task of communication without waste of words. Functional language is straightforward, preferring the succinct to the long-winded. It avoids ambiguity, vagueness, and padding--the use of expressions merely taking up space rather than adding to the substance of a discussion. It is as concrete and specific as the subject matter permits, because concrete and specific words give the reader something definite to grasp, enabling him to follow

the writer's meaning more easily. In the widest sense, function-
al language is the successful adaptation of verbal means to a
persuasive end. In this article, discussion is confined to meth-
ods for dealing with various kinds of haziness and wordiness
that often impede communication.

Though averse to waste of words, functional language need
not always be terse and factual. It may be elaborate and color-
ful, and it may include such ornamental devices as word play,
allusion, irony, and metaphor if these are likely to give pleasure
to the reader. What functional language cannot be is empty: if
it gives neither knowledge nor pleasure, if it affords neither ele-
gance of expression nor solidity of communication, it is unfunc-
tional—that is, useless.

I. ABSTRACT AND CONCRETE

Except for the proper nouns, almost all words are abstract
in the sense that they do not denominate individual things but
classes of things. Even such concrete words as *book* and *umbrella*
are abstract in this sense, for they are the names of a class
rather than an individual object. A book may be a collection
of Shakespeare's works or a best-selling comic book, but of both
we might say, "What a book!" The word *book* ignores the differ-
ences in content, size, shape, and price and identifies the com-
mon property of the two objects—they are something to read
bound in volumes. This abstractness inherent in language does
not impede communication but makes it possible: we understand
the word largely through our ability to organize the flux of sen-
sation and perception into entities and classes of entities.

But there is another, more restricted sense, in which words
are abstract. Abstract words in this second sense are those that
refer to something intangible—something that cannot be directly
experienced by the senses. They are the opposite of concrete
words, which refer to tangible things. *Book* is concrete, but

literature   is abstract;   *President*   is concrete, but   *authority* is abstract;   *judge*   is concrete, but   *law* is abstract.   Even if abstractions refer to things that cannot be seen or touched, most of them have fairly definite core of meaning: *opposition,   opinion, hope, childhood, infancy, similarity,*   and the like do not often cause difficulties of communication.   The so-called "high-level abstractions," however, are continual source of difficulty: *democ-racy, beauty, guilt, progress,* and *normality,*   to take instances almost at random, are exceedingly difficult to use without equivo-cation because they mean so many different things and cannot be checked against a definite, tangible region of experience. The only way to cut down on the potential misunderstandings in-herent in these words is to be alert to their dangers and to give their definitions.

Aside from the confusion that surrounds high-level abstrac-tions, abstract words have one other serious disadvantage for the writer: since they refer to intangibles, they present no images to the mind.   They give the reader nothing he can visualize or grasp, and for that reason, highly abstract prose is often hard to follow.   The reader is likely to feel that he is being led into a bloodless and bodiless realm where nothing has a recognizable shape or a resemblance to the ordinary world he sees and knows. The following story illustrates this point clearly:

> A young girl came home from school and was explaining how to empty an egg without breaking its shell.   "Take an egg," she said, "and make a perforation in the base and a corre-sponding one in the apex.   Then apply the lips to the aper-ture and by forcibly inhaling the breath the shell is entirely discharged of its contents."   An old lady who was listening exclaimed: "It beats all how folks do things nowadays.   When I was a gal, they made a hole in each end and sucked."

(Eric Partridge)

Described altogether by abstractions, even what is most familiar

can become unrecognizable.

Necessarily, much of our discourse is about things that cannot be seen or touched, and abstract words make up a very important part of our vocabulary. Abstract language dominates in mathematics, philosophy, and science, and in any region where "pure ideas rather than immediate experience are paramount. To read mathematics or philosophy, most people must undergo a special training to accustom themselves to move always at the level of the general and the abstract. Most people need the concrete to help them understand the abstract.

Fortunately, many abstract ideas can be stated with the help of concrete language that makes them more vivid and definite. Many words for mental events are borrowed from the realm of physical events, and a writer who exploits these parallels of language between the mental and the physical can make his subject more vivid to his readers. In the following example, it is possible to observe the usage of concrete imagery to give tangibility to a highly abstract discussion of the instability of human ideas:

> And yet if he be a true philosopher, he must see that there is nothing final in any actually given **equilibrium** of human ideas, but that, as our present laws and customs have **fought** and **conquered** other past ones, so they will in their turn be **overthrown** by any newly discovered order which will **hush up the complaints** that they still give rise to, without producing others **louder** still. . . . And although a man always risks much when he **breaks away** from established rules and **strives** to realize a larger ideal whole than they permit, yet the philosopher must allow that it is at all times **open** to anyone to make the experiment, provided he fear not **to stake his life** and character **on the throw**. The pinch is always here. **Pent in** under every system of moral rules are innumerable persons whom it **weighs upon**, and good which it represses; and these are always **rumbling** and **grumbling** in

the **background**, and ready for any issue by which they may get free.   (William James)

The great advantage of concrete language is that it evokes images and sensations. It appeals directly to the senses and the feelings, calling up the familiar world we can all see and respond to. It adds flesh and blood to the skeleton of thought. Without the help of concrete language, abstractions remain vague and shapeless; they float in a void, eluding the reader's grasp.

A very useful way of rendering the abstract more concrete is to use synecdoche—a figure of speech in which the part signifies the whole. Sometimes it is used almost unconsiously, as in the expressions *"mouths* to feed," "farm *hands,"* and "marching *feet."* Used purposively, this figure of speech can enliven expression by putting an image before the reader rather than an abstraction. The part used to signify the whole should be a significant one, and relevant to the point under discussion:

> The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the worker's uprising in Poland, and the election of right-wing Ronald Reagan to the American presidency have together contributed to the creation of a new world situation which may be called Cold War II.
>
> *(Foreign Affairs)*

Put yourself in the place of the airline of a country with the world's highest areal cableway, the world's closest-meshed railway network, the world's steepest cog railway, and the world's longest highway tunnel. For fifty years it has been the duty of Swissair to get from as many places as possible to as many others as possible in true Swiss style, namely by the shortest and most convenient route.

(Advertisement by Swissair)

They are willing, apparently, at least for a season, to endure the wretched Parisian **plumbing**, the public baths, the Paris **age,** and **dirt.**

(James Baldwin)

II. GENERAL AND SPECIFIC

General and *specific* are relative terms. *Grain* is specific in relation to *food*, but general in relation to *wheat*, which in turn is general in relation to *Iowa winter wheat*. The most general words are universals such as *organism, time, space,* and *number*. The most specific are proper names: *Ronald Reagan, the White House, the United States*. Most words can be fitted into a scale running from general to specific: for instance, organism, mammal, man, American, Southerner, Georgian, Plainsman, and so on down to Jimmy Carter. The usual way to make a word more specific is to attach qualifiers to it: American; white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant American; white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant American born and living in Williston, North Dakota.

The writer's problem is to discover the exact degree of generality or specificity that suits his purpose. Sometimes, although rarely, a writer errs on the side of being too specific:

> 98.7% of all Shakespearean critics writing since 1920 agree that *Hamlet* is a better play than *Titus Andronicus*.

> Seurat's painting *La Grande Jatte* is composed of 16,423 separate dots of paint.

Such statements are only slightly exaggerated examples of what happens when a writer is more specific than the adequate treatment of the subject requires. They indicate a fussy pedantry and a mistaken belief that numerical accuracy is always relevant. The following would be more in keeping with the degree of precision called for by the subject:

> Everybody agrees that *Hamlet* is a better play than *Titus Andronicus*.

> Seurat's pointillist paintings are made up of thousands of separate dots of paint.

On occasion, a writer may decide to give "the facts and nothing but the facts" and confine himself exclusively to very specific statements. If he does so for very long, he will almost certainly

become unintelligible, for without general statement to interpret their significance, a collection of bare data is without order or direction.

The faults of being overly specific are negligible when they are compared to those of being too general, for probably the worst flaw in modern prose is that it is too general and abstract. Again and again, nebulous generalities drive out concrete, specific statements:

> Certain sections of personnel have made representations in regard to the heating system.
> (The girls in the stenographic pool have complained that the building is overheated and underventilated.)
>
> The faculty has reached a consensus that the syllabus for honors students must be made more comprehensive.
> (The faculty has agreed that honors students must be required to read more widely.)
>
> I would characterize that hotel as an undesirable place to stay.
> (That hotel is dirty and has bedbugs.)
>
> Economic considerations prevent the implementations of your proposal.
> (Your proposal is too expensive.)
>
> There is a trend toward certain kind of foreign cars.
> (More people bought small foreign cars this year than last.)

Statements like these blur the edges of meaning and envelop ideas in a haze of vagueness, a haze that is a constant threat to clarity, vigor, and precision.

III. VAGUENESS

In conversation, the things we know about the person who is speaking, his tone of voice, his facial expression and gestures, all help us to grasp the significance of what he is saying. If we do not understand him, we can stop him and ask questions. Between close friends, the sketchiest remarks may be fraught with meanings because the friends know the complex of ideas and feelings that lie behind the words. But in writing we have only the words on the page to guide us. If statements are vague and

general, we cannot stop the writer and cross-examine him, nor, ordinarily, can we rely on what we know about him to supply missing parts of argument or exposition.

Vague writing is the failure to provide enough tangible details. It merely points in the direction of the idea or experience the writer is discussing and does little to set the subject directly before the reader. It relies on the general word rather than the specific one, the abstract rather than the concrete. It fails to give the reader the specific details, concrete images, and examples that make generalities come to life. Following are illustrations of vagueness in individual statements, along with suggested improvements.

> Before the war I taught for a while.
> (Before the Korean War, I taught English at a small high school in Ohio for three years.)

> The trip was made difficult by poor weather.
> (Heavy white fog settled down on the highway just as we were entering Nagano Prefecture, and in ten minutes it became so thick that we could hardly see five meters away.)

> In the past, the labor unions were mostly organizations of workers in the higher brackets.
> (Until well into the twentieth century, American labor unions were largely made up of highly skilled workers in such trades as printing.)

> Imperialism in Africa influenced the situations that led up to World War I.
> (The scramble of the European powers to divide Africa up among themselves intensified their rivalries at home and increased the growth of tension and suspicion in international relations that preceded World War I.)

Vagueness often arises from the use of a group of indispensable common words that might be called "thing-words" because they have no definite meaning by themselves like pronouns. Among the most frequently used are *area, aspect, case, consideration, factor, field, instance, manifestation,* and *phenomenon.* Properly used, they refer to some idea or fact given earlier. Without such reference, they merely encumber statements with meaningless phrases or baffle the reader, who would like to know the name

of the mysterious "factor" or "aspect" under discussion.

When a reader can discover no reference to a meaning in one of the "thing-words," communication stops altogether. By itself, the statement,"This fact is manifest in many aspects of the phenomenon" conveys nothing. Even in a context which supplies information about what the "factor" and the "phenomenon" are, it is feeble and vague, forcing the reader to look back for too many references at once.

IV. AMBIGUITY

Ambiguity arises when two or more meanings are equally possible for the same word, phrase, or sentence. Many statements, taken by themselves, would be completely ambiguous, but ordinarily their context makes clear which meaning is the relevant one. Thus, in "I have been skating on very thin ice all winter," the "ice" may be either literal or metaphorical. If the next sentence reads, "I have been sick and out of work since November" the relevant sense of "thin ice" is established.

But sometimes context does not clear up ambiguity, or does so only after the reader has had the trouble of puzzling it out. Ambiguity most often arises in connection with problems of sentence structure and vocabulary. Dangling and misplaced modifiers create ambiguity:

> Standing in the distance, David could see the mountains.
> (Is David standing in the distance, or are the mountains, or are both?)

> Heavily armed as he was, the detective had difficulty subduing the robber.
> (Who has the gun?)

So may faulty pronoun reference:

> Linda told Jackie that she was sorry she could not come to the party.
> (Which girl cannot come to the party?)

Or faulty predication:

> The denial of the accuracy of the report was rejected by the

Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee.
(After two or three readings, one may decide that the statement means "The Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee denied that the report was inaccurate.")

Divided usage of words can also be a source of ambiguity:

Jesperson made a very *fine* distinction between *junction* and *nexus*.
(Is it a distinction that the writer approves of heartily, or one that is subtly made?)

Sometimes the most common words become ambiguous:

The lawyer asked the witness to give more relevant facts.
(Further facts? Facts more closely related to the issue at hand?)

I like Tom as well as Jim.
(As much as? In addition to?)

Sometimes ambiguity is deliberate, as often heard in the world of politics:

We shall lose no time in considering your suggestions.

As for the residents living in the area, we will try to obtain their understanding and cooperation before building the nuclear power plant.

Unlike vagueness and wordiness, ambiguity (in the sense discussed here) is comparatively rare. It will almost never appear in the work of a writer who is willing to go beyond asking himself, "Will the reader understand me?" to the more stringent question, "Is there anything here that a reader might possibly misunderstand?"

V. VERBIAGE

Even lively ideas and potentially lively style can be dragged down into dullness if they are weighted with verbal deadwood—words and phrases that add nothing to the meaning, elegance, or formal structure of a statement. Useless phrases and meaningless repetitions are most likely to appear in the first drafts, because the writer is so preoccupied with shaping his thought that he has little attention left over for economy of expression. One of the main tasks of revision is to clear away exess verbiage either

by simply drawing a line through the offending expression or by rewording a sentence.

The thin-faced words in these sentences add nothing and should be struck out:

Many of the Whistler's paintings are all gray and white in color.

The early reviews of James Joyce's masterpiece were usually vituperative in nature.

Superfluous prepositions are a waste of words:

Please refer back to the first chapter.

The book tries to penetrate into the mysteries of prehistoric times in Japan.

He descended down the garden path.

He continued on in the same familiar vein for more than an hour.

The murderer always returns back to the scene of the crime.

Where is the Post Office at?

Many writers habitually use long prepositions instead of short ones. The mere length of "according to," "in regard to," "by means of," and "in terms of" would not be troublesome if they were not used so often as substitutes for shorter, or more precise connectives:

We went to Tokyo by means of the train. (by)

Never judge in terms of appearances. (by)

We cannot reach a decision, inasmuch as none of the documents have arrived. (since)

In terms of the present outflow of gold, the government has changed its policy in regard to duty-free imports. (Because of, on)

Each plan must be judged according to its merits. (on)

Often the predication of a clause can profitably be shortened and made more direct:

These new discoveries serve to show the good effects of international cooperation in science.
(These new discoveries show . . .)

The heavy rains have had the effect of causing dangerous

mud slides.
(The heavy rains have caused . . .)

Improvements in food storage methods have been brought about during the last twenty years.
(There have been improvements in . . .)

The Planning Commission will give consideration to all petitions.
(The Planning Commission will consider . . .)

A writer who feels that every noun must have its adjective and every verb and adjective its adverb is certain to clutter up his prose with verbiage. Many adjectives of intensification are overworked in the hope that they will strengthen the noun they modify: a *serious* emergency, an *acute* crisis, an *alarming* increase, a *stirring* speech, an *unprecedented* move, an *essential* condition, an *inevitable* consequence, a *definite* decision, and *past* history. In the hope of being more forceful, some writers sprinkle about such adverbs of intensification as *extremely*, *exceedingly*, and *exceptionally:* an *extremely* difficult decision, an *exceptionally* large number. *Very* has almost lost its meaning through overuse: a *very* harsh law, a *very* absolute denial. One soon expects to hear of diseases that are *very* fatal and of criminals who are found *very* guilty by the jury. A writer who always uses such means of emphasis, a writer for whom all crises are *acute* and all consequences *inevitable*, will have nothing left to say when a crisis *is* acute or a consequence inevitable. He has devalued his stock of emphatic words.

Some writers go beyond adoring every word with a modifier to operate on the principle that words are best in paisr. The belief that two words are better than one often leads to needless duplication:

Hobbs thought that life was nasty, brutish, animalistic, and short.

The demonstrations against the government appear to be spontaneous and unplanned.

She looked at the waiter with an icy, frozen stare.

In each pair of thin-faced words, two words are used to do the work of one: one of each pair should be struck out. Sometimes it is more effective to reorder a sentence to make the duplication meaningful:

> Herodotus considered the troops of Xerxes fearful and cowardly. (Herodotus considered the troops of Xerxes cowardly—equally fearful of the Greeks and of the sea.)

> Her notoriety and fame soon spread from Nagoya to entire Japan.
> (Her notoriety, her dishonorable fame, soon spread from Nagoya to entire Japan.)

As a final warning, consider what might happen if someone decided to say everything twice in every part of a sentence:

> The plots and conspiracies of the rash, hot-headed revolutionaries who want to overthrow the present government and topple it from power have brought about and inspired more fear and panic in the big metropolitan cities than in the rural countryside.

FINAL COMMENT

The most economical use of words, discussed here as a functional vocabulary, thus can be achieved by paying careful attention to the problems of abstract and concrete, general and specific, vagueness, ambiguity, and verbiage. Functional language is substantive, straightforward, and often direct. To some critics, such a writing may appear too mechanical and unacceptable as a literary writing. However, even in the world of pure literature, what is most fundamental is clear communication. Hence, we cannot talk about *good* writing without giving consideration to clarity in ideas that have to be communicated. Writing English in Japan almost inevitably occurs in a nonliterary situation. Whether it is in an academic writing or in a business writing, the usage of functional language is one of the most fundamental rules to be observed in making communication as clear as possible.

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