

LANGUAGE REVISION BY DELETION OF ABSOLUTISMS

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MANY PROPOSALS, in a wide variety, have been made for revising the English language in order to increase its efficiency and usefulness. Some would deal with the morphological level (*I am, you am, he am, we am, youse am, they am*), while others would make structural changes on the syntactical level, such as altering the subject-predicate relationship. The simplest and most feasible method is revision by vocabulary selection.

The question might be asked whether this is “language revision” at all. In one sense we are revising the language whenever we construct a new sentence. Yet in doing so we are selecting elements from the resources offered to us out of the forms available. Possibly this should be called *idiolectal revision* — that is, the revision of each person’s individual usage, not the language itself. It is easily open to us to make deliberate choices on the lexical level.

I am proposing in this paper that we make certain vocabulary choices that will bring our discourse into accord with the world as we actually find it. It is clear to many of us that we live in a process world, in which our judgments can only be probabilistic. Therefore we would do well to avoid finalistic, absolutistic terms. Can we ever find *perfection* or *certainty* or *truth*? No! Then let us stop using such words in our formulations.

In presenting my point of view, I hope that I will avoid the danger of mere “word magic.” I am advocating the orientation of relativism and contextuality, and the particular words are important merely because they indicate an orientation. This is not a plea for “moderation” or the “golden mean,” worthy as those goals are, but I wish to make a deeper philosophical point. We need a new way of looking at the world, a revised orientation that is sometimes called “Heraclitean” — the recognition of change from minute to minute.

The vocabulary of absolutism is very much with us even on the colloquial level. How easy it is to say: “No, thank you, I’m perfectly comfortable.” *Perfectly*? Or we can exclaim, “I’m *absolutely* dead!” Such expressions do not cause any real trouble, but they are symptomatic of a common orientation. One opens a Chinese fortune cookie to find, “Perfection is your everlasting goal.” Advertising practices accustom us to absolutistic patterns. Thus in a current newspaper a baking company in Great Neck, on Long Island, claims that it is situated in “the community with the absolutely most discriminating sweet tooth in America (possibly the world).” (1) This uses the rhetorical device of hyperbole, a different matter from what I am discussing.

Foremost among the words to be eliminated is the word *certain*. It is very easy to begin a sentence with, “I’m *certain* that ...”; but it is just as easy to say, “It *seems to me* that ...” The “quest for certainty” has engaged the attention of many thinkers, and it will take a genuine revolution to substitute a probabilistic outlook, to learn to live without certainties.

Sound semioticians will agree, I think, with the dictum of Alfred North Whitehead, in his book *Process and Reality*: “In philosophical discussion, the merest hint of dogmatic certainty as to finality of statement is an exhibition of folly.” (2) That passage in the copy of the book owned by Alfred Korzybski was underlined with a magenta pencil, to make it stand out beyond his other underlinings. And yet he had a criticism, for he wrote in the margin: “not with a date.” He recognized that the limiting of an absolutism changes its character.

Whitehead paid careful attention to terminology. He discarded the terms *Platonic form*, *essence*, and others, then continued: “Accordingly, by way of employing a term devoid of misleading suggestions, I use the phrase *eternal object*.” (3) Thus he seemed unaware of the dangers of the absolutism *eternal*. Alfred Korzybski, in the copy I have cited, wrote in the margin, “very misleading.”

Alfred Korzybski himself has a very good passage in which he sharply attacked the phrase “eternal verities.” As he wrote in *Science and Sanity*:

From time immemorial, some men were supposed to deal in one-valued ‘eternal verities.’ We called such men ‘philosophers’ or ‘metaphysicians.’ But they

seldom realized that all their 'eternal verities' consisted of *words*, and words which, for the most part, belonged to a primitive language, reflecting in its structure the assumed structure of the world of remote antiquity. Besides, they did not realize that these 'eternal verities' last only so long as the human nervous system is not altered. Under the influence of these 'philosophers,' two-valued 'logic,' and confusion of orders of abstraction, nearly all of us contracted a firmly rooted predilection for 'general' statements, 'universals,' as they are called — which, in most cases, inherently involved the semantic one-valued conviction of validity for all 'time' to come. (4)

Whitehead and Korzybski are only two of a long list of philosophers that could be cited for their opposition to absolutisms. But what is desirable is to make this outlook available to a wide general public, and I wish to propose a device for doing so.

If a jaunty name for a popular movement could be devised, it might catch on and have a widespread influence. What I am proposing is the name "EMA," made from the initials of "English Minus Absolutisms." A wide popular vogue for EMA might sanitize and improve our use of English as a communicative vehicle. "Let's use EMA" could well become an important directive for increasing sanity in our time.

The use of EMA will have many ramifications. Some questionable usages can be spotted easily, but others are somewhat hidden.

For instance, is the word *beginning* an absolutism? The danger of that word has been pointed out in a recent polemical discussion of cosmology, in the following passage:

We often read scientists who refer to "the beginning of the universe." They are being careless with their language, for to the best of our knowledge the universe had no beginning. It apparently underwent a tremendous transformation some twenty billion years ago, but the transformation was not a beginning in any absolute sense. Scientists shouldn't be giving fodder to those theologians who are determined to find God somewhere. (5)

Is there validity in glittering statements like *Never say never* or *This is a universe where nothing never happens*? The opposite of a quality creates an absolutism — *intolerable, ineradicable, insoluble, incorrigible, interminable, impregnable, infallible*. In popular parlance, *irresistible* forces are often meeting *immovable* objects. How can we salvage the useful notion of "invariance"? Can we develop the sensitivity to discriminate between *everlasting* (which is absolutistic) and *enduring* (not absolutistic)? Is *endless* an absolutism?

In astronomy the term “fixed star” has had some usage, by way of contrast with the planets. But it has been found that they are not “fixed.” Ptolemy in the second century made a record of the stars as he saw them, but Edmund Halley, in the eighteenth century, found that their relative positions had changed, the closer ones most of all, and now the stars are known to have what is called “proper motion.”

The word *fixed* is even less permissible when it is applied to language. A professor of political science at Tulane University has lauded the United States Constitution as having “permanent principles and fixed language.” (6)

The notion of “fixed” language, outside the reach of interpretation, is a false one; and clearer thinkers have gone so far as to say that the Constitution is whatever the judges say it is.

One of the most problematical of the absolutistic words is the word *all*. In my own field of linguistics, I am often surprised at the abandon with which some linguists use the term “*all* languages” and then draw questionable conclusions about so-called “universals.” They would do well to say “all languages so far studied.” This introduces the “limited all” or the “indexed all.”

If one says “All chairs have four legs,” the *all* there is simply a function of the definition, meaning that an example in the class *chair* is to be delineated by its having four legs. If an innovator comes along and provides a fifth leg, then it is not a “chair,” but a “super-chair” or whatever one might choose to call it. If one wishes to consider a three-legged stool, one would have a classification problem that would be decided arbitrarily.

The *alls* that cause trouble are the unlimited *alls*. So prevalent are they in popular usage that some teachers of general semantics inveigh strongly against what they call *allness*. Semantically allied to *all* is the word *complete*. A re-orientation would take place if we could build into our discourse the habitual use of *et cetera* (etc.) or at least the awareness of the need of an *et cetera*.

The gruesomeness of “totalitarianism” should warn us of the dangers of the word *total*. In fact, references to the “total woman” in recent years became a laughingstock.

Notions of “perfection” and what is “perfect” plague us, and the pursuit of EMA should do away with them. The epithet *perfectionist* has justifiably become a term of derogation. The late Luigi Barzini, in his book *The Europeans*, found fault with Americans for their “relentless pursuit of ultimate and unreachable perfection” and for their belief in “the endless perfectability of man.” (7) Americans do believe in improvement and amelioration, and this can easily be transformed into a belief in “perfectibility.” The so-called “idea of progress” is not in itself absolutistic, but many people jump to the conclusion that the goal

of progress must be “perfection” and thus are turned off from it, whereas progress in its natural contexts refers to continual melioration.

In my own experience as a teacher in departments of English, I have continually had to battle the word *correct*, particularly in my course “Problems in English Usage” that I taught for over twenty years at Columbia University. The students come to me, after their years in grade school and high school, with the usual question on their lips, “Is it correct to say so-and-so?” This presupposes that there is some ‘well-formed’ language ‘out there’ apart from what appears on people’s tongues, and it is very difficult to get across the notion that language is an instrument of social interaction that developed naturalistically. I have to battle the word *correct* continually with substitutes like “Is it *appropriate* to say so-and-so?”

Especially important would be a shift in our attitudes toward English spelling. There is no commoner phrase than “the correct spelling.” It forms a matrix in which false attitudes toward language are engendered. If spelling is either *correct* or *incorrect*, then that same standard can be applied to other things too. Here the chief factor is that misleading word *correct*. In all such cases, we should substitute an appropriate term such as “the *conventional* spelling” or “the *traditional* spelling.”

If someone asks you, “What is the correct spelling of so-and-so?” you would do a social service by giving a polite but evasive reply. “Well, the *usual* spelling that has developed among writers of English is so-and-so.” Your inquirer might be interested to learn that a common word like *good* has been spelled in thirteen different ways, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, with seven more from Scottish usage. But, you should add, it has become conventional to write *g-o-o-d*.

This advice does not amount to a relaxation of standards, for the attempted absolutism causes blockages in the student. The blockages would tend to go away when the student becomes aware of the conventional nature of spelling. Spelling problems would be defused.

It is curious that the very common colloquialism *O.K.*, which had its origin in the phrase *oll korrekt*, does not seem to share the pernicious effect of its source, the word *correct*. It has become a very tame word of assent and has weakened into the same sense as *adequate*. In fact, the word *adequate* itself might be considered an absolutism, for what is more finalistic than fitting *just right*? Yet *adequate* now commonly means “barely sufficient.”

I am proposing EMA as a popular movement, and I feel fairly sure that it will leave technical philosophers untouched. They will still want to debate the “coherence theory of truth” versus the “correspondence theory of truth” and so

on. But the ordinary speaker of English could well stop saying, “Let’s get at the *truth*” and say in EMA, “Let’s find out what happened.”

The many philosophers who have talked about “the *absolute*” (whatever that could possibly be) have saddled the world with a mess of verbiage.

The absolutistic orientation is the underpinning of the fanaticisms that lead to terrorism and war. A cry from the heart has come from a young Cambodian refugee when he said: “Adults who are sure they are absolutely right, they make war over their absolute rightness.” (8) Maladjustments in social and personal relations have the same source. These patterns are deadly serious, but we can combat them by means of EMA in a different spirit. It could be good fun to experiment with winnowing out the absolutistic terms. The “play spirit” habitually motivates much of what we do in language usage, and the “play spirit” could carry EMA along until it became an important factor in our behavior.

When we find ourselves using the very common absolutisms such as *always, never, forever, eternity, pure, final, ultimate*, and so on, we could say to ourselves: “Was that term necessary? Could we frame our sentence in some other way?”

It is tempting to perpetrate the aphorism, “Every absolutism is a pathology.” But methodological honesty would require us to go on to say, “including this one.” Then where would we be? The word *pathology* may not be appropriate, for we must be generous and understanding in our disagreements. Absolutisms fit very well into the orientations that are generally accepted in our culture.

I am here pleading for the orientation into which absolutisms do not fit. An attention to terminology — the elimination of words that carry the absolutistic message — would call our attention to the new orientation. The orientation is what matters, not the choice of particular words. But particular words coach us in our orientations, so I feel justified in presenting the desirability of EMA.

Let us go forward fervently in popularizing EMA.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The *New York Times*, October 10, 1984, p. C11.
2. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York, 1929), p. X,
3. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
4. Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity* (Lancaster, Pa., 1933), p. 140.
5. Deane Starr, in *Free Inquiry*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Fall, 1984), p. 59.
6. Gary L. McDowell, in *The New York Times*, October 10, 1984, p. A26, col. 6.
7. Luigi Barzini, *The Europeans* (New York, 1983), pp. 230 and 238.
8. The *New York Times*, November 9, 1984, p. A1, col. 6.

The words listed below represent examples of “absolutisms” cited by the author. — Ed.

absolutely	eternity	interminable
all	everlasting	intolerable
always	final	irresistible
beginning	fixed	never
certain	forever	perfection
certainty	immovable	perfectly
complete	impregnable	Platonic form
correct	incorrigible	pure
endless	ineradicable	total
essence	infallible	truth
eternal	insoluble	ultimate