

Linguistic Liberties

Not Stating the Obvious

By J V NARLIKAR

A vedic myth tells the story of Tvashta who got so angry with Indra, the ruler of the gods, that he performed a yajna and asked for a son who shall be *Indrashatru*, that is, one who shall destroy Indra. Unfortunately, he did not stress the right syllable and the same word meant the exact opposite: 'one who shall be destroyed by Indra'. The offspring, who became famous as the demon Vritrasura, did cause a lot of havoc, before succumbing to Indra.

The story reminds us how sensitive the language can be in communicating the message we wish to convey. Sanskrit is specially sensitive not only to the words used, but — as Tvashta discovered to his chagrin, also to the stress laid on them. Even a much more matter of fact language like English has examples like this one: split the last word of the atheist's assertion: 'God is nowhere' and it means the opposite: 'God is now here'.

Cold-blooded Murder

In this day and age when we are entrusting more and more tasks and even decisions to computers who need to be instructed clearly on what we want them to do, it has become imperative that we are ourselves clear in our mind as to what words to give these instructions in. Those who do programming are aware of the pitfalls that lie in wait. Lack of precision in telling the computer what we want often results in absurd answers.

As the 20th century draws to a close, perhaps it is time to review how we communicate, not just with the computers, but with one another. Since the government looms large in everything we do, let us begin with it.

The Gita urges us not to be involved in anything we do: we should do whatever we do because it is our duty. Nowhere is this philosophy more evident than in the communications you receive from your administrators. It will be worded in the 'passive mode'. There should be no occasion to lay the responsibility for the contents at the door of the person who wrote the letter. Whether you are receiving a memo or an award, the writer will simply communicate the same to you on behalf of an unstated agency. 'It has been de-

cided...' so it says, leaving it vague as to who took the decision. If I were receiving an award, I would feel happier if the letter had a warm personal touch. But no! I believe, the first thing they teach an administrative probationer is to forget the 'active'...go for the passive because it is safe.

The same applies to a letter of admission a student may receive from an educational institution or a job offer to an academic from a university. The new entrant will have no feeling of welcome nor a sense of thrill in joining the organisation on receiving the dry letter of intimation (not invitation, mind you). There are exceptions, of course, where the head of an organisation writes to the new student welcoming him or her to the institution. But they stand out as exceptions against the general background of apathetic communications sent by the officials.

Largely through official channels a new brand of English peculiar to India has evolved where instructions are issued 'to do the needful', for example, or where visits are 'preponed'. Where, words spoken quickly one after the other are joined together as one word, as in 'in spite of, or in 'ofcourse', 'in depth', etc. Or, where singular verbs go with plural subjects and vice versa.

Cold blooded murder of the English tongue? Before the modern Professor Henry Higgins raises a howl of protest at the liberties being taken with his favourite language by the brown native, he should be aware that the dreaded native is equally ruthless with his own mother tongue. He will fight demonically, if necessary destroying public property to make his point against any imposition of a foreign tongue on his state. But once he has got his own mother tongue to use, does he respect it? Look at public hoardings and see how many mistakes of grammar, syntax and even spelling are committed in the mother tongue of the state.

Diagonally Opposite

Or if you have the patience to read and decipher the almost illegible cyclostyled government circulars, you will see how often the language of official communication

could have been simplified.

Leaving officialdom aside, and turning to lay persons, how often they take liberties with facts and accuracy in their own dealings? For example, I was stumped when told that a certain house I was looking for was diagonally opposite Bombay Central. 'Opposite' I could understand, but what is diagonally opposite?

Sometimes, local conditions compel you to be inaccurate whether you like it or not. If I take a cab from Kings Cross station in London, and ask the driver to take me to Burlington House, Piccadilly, he will take me there. If I ask a Delhi cabby to take me to the Indian National Science Academy (INSA) on Bahadurshah Zafar Marg, I will get a blank stare. When I tell him, it is near the ITO, then all is well. Left to myself, I would not consider that INSA is near the ITO, but the cab driver thinks it is near enough. But why the driver does not know a big road with newspaper offices as a Delhi landmark, I have not figured out.

Good Guess

Suppose you wish to go by car to some important place for the first time and wish to know what the road condition is like. You will be told that the road is 'good'. This may mean any of the following: 'the road exists but is a dirt track', 'the road is tarred but full of pot-holes or the road is tarred and smooth'. If you make the mistake of asking several people and probe into these details, you will be confused by the many different answers.

Beware of tautological statements too, which may sound very impressive but which do not mean a thing. Like the statement found on a toilet roll of a well-known make: 'Will fit any suitable container'. Sounds fantastic. But what container is suitable? Only the one which will fit the roll, of course. Or the washing powder which washes whiter...whiter than what? Your guess is as good as mine.

