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### (The Cult of) Plain Speaking

God must have loved poor people,  
or He wouldn't have made so many of them.

—Abraham Lincoln

Let your yea be yea, and your nay be nay.

—Jimmy Cliff

A recurrent spectre is haunting the men of the white-collar elite of the United States today: the spectre of wimpdom. (Since I count myself a member of this group, I will use the first person in alluding to ourselves from now on.) We believe (with a belief compounded of a mixture of genuine envy and guilt, insecurity, self-dislike and a kind of counterfeit nostalgia) in the moral superiority and greater sincerity not only of the oppressed (cf. Russell 1950), but of poor people as more spontaneous, more natural (as Flaubert put it, "dans le vrai"), and, above all, we think of "real" men as more virile, than members of the denatured and decadent "croissantcrowd" that we belong to:

Camp Sharpshoon was a camp for youths from inner-city New York, who were popularly known at the time as "disadvantaged," which meant they knew a LOT more about sex than I did. I was in charge of a group of 12- and 13-year-old boys, and when they'd get to talking about sex, I, the counsellor, the Voice of Maturity, the Father Figure for these Troubled children, would listen intently, occasionally contributing helpful words of guidance, such as: "Really?" And: "Gosh!" There were times when I would have given my left arm to be a disadvantaged youth." (Barry 1988:281-2)

The strands can be distinguished in this cult of the commoner: an pseudo-egalitarian reverence for the unaffected wisdom of "real people" in general, and a frankly sexual envy of "real men." Sometimes one of these strands predominates, and these notions can of course be mutually

contradictory. However, they are also so deeply intertwined that trying to keep them separate is sometimes impossible.

The cult extends to a kind of adulation of the unaffected vigor of the one-syllable words in which "real people" express themselves, and this cult of plain speaking (CPS) will be my subject here. I hope, first, to demonstrate that the ideology, although not ubiquitous, is nevertheless widespread, and to give some examples of its expression. And then, I would like to present some of the reasons why it is fundamentally misconceived and incoherent.

### 1. The spread of the cult

That the cult is a reality is easily demonstrated by reference to its exploitation in recent American films from *The Godfather* to *The Last Action Hero*.

Where does it come from? In the USA today, such a recurrent attitude may derive in part from a very strong local tradition of "anti-intellectualism in American life" in general (ably described and analyzed in Richard Hofstadter's book of the same title (Hofstadter 1963), as well as in Dwight MacDonald's critique of Kulturbolshevismus, or "anti-intellectualism for intellectuals" (MacDonald 1941/1958). In recent years, the attitude has been exploited in the USA, with differing degrees of success, by Midwestern and southern political figures from Harry Truman to George Wallace, and Ross Perot, and even effete eastern millionaires like George Bush have attempted to cash in on it (with miserable results). Although populism is generally associated with egalitarian and progressive sentiments, it is just as easily appropriated by the right, and is quite compatible with a frightening know-nothingism. Indeed, in a recent article in *The Nation* (February 17, 1992),<sup>1</sup> Christopher Hitchens was right to draw attention to the "near-perfect symmetry" between Jesse Helms' attacks on the National Endowment for the Arts, and Josef Goebbels' attacks on the "incomprehensible and elitist"—and hence, "degenerate"—expressionist art of the 1930's.

More generally, our populist attitude may be part of a Western European tradition deriving from Romantics like Wordsworth, William Blake, Goethe, Herder, and Rousseau, and the latter's familiar staple of "the noble savage." We encounter this figure again and again in our serious literature. Often, he is explicitly contrasted with the effete attenuated nerd (Flaubert, Kafka, Thomas Mann) who regularly presents and describes him to us. Isaac Babel, the twentieth century Soviet

short story writer, speaks as an inheritor of this tradition in idolizing the virile brigand Benya Krik, "the king" of Odessa gangsters:

Forget for a while that you have spectacles on your nose, and autumn in your heart. Leave off raising a ruckus at your writing desk, and being timid in public. Imagine for a moment that you raise a ruckus out in public, and you're timid on paper. You're a tiger, a lion, a cat. You can spend a night with a Russian woman, and leave her satisfied. (Babel "How it was done in Odessa," *Selected Stories and Plays*, 166)

The essence of the idea of a necessary antithesis between honesty and civility is encapsulated in a memorable interchange in Goethe's *Faust* II (6770-1):

Mephistopheles: Du weisst ja nicht, mein Freund, wie groß du bist.

Bacchalaureus: Im deutschen lügt man, wenn man höflich ist.

But our idealization of the language of the salt of the earth and a concomitant revulsion for linguistic artifice and sophistication (as in the passage from *Faust*) is much older than Goethe, Rousseau—or Shakespeare, whose Marc Antony "a plain blunt man that love my friend," has given lessons in demagoguery to English speakers for nearly four hundred years. In fact, it easily goes back within our Judeo-Christian tradition at least to the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew VI), and the idealization of the "good shepherds" of Virgil (Marx 1964:19), and the "Germans" of Tacitus, and continues to the present, where it is represented not only in High, but also in popular culture.

In High Anglo-American culture, notable apostles of the cult of plain speaking include George Orwell, who not only strove to achieve for himself a kind of "prose like a windowpane," but who excoriated every variety of bombast, baroque language, and gobbledygook in his famous essay on "Politics and the English language." The most memorable passage in this masterpiece of invective is Orwell's comparison of plain speech with its translation into officialese:

Here is a well-known verse from *Ecclesiastes*:

I returned and I saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise nor yet riches to men of understanding; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

Here it is in modern English:

Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account. (Orwell 1957:149)

Orwell's dual attitude (adulation of plain speaking, coupled with boundless contempt for gobbledygook and its purveyors) also provides the moral bedrock which underlies William Labov's eloquent albeit scholarly and impeccably academic partisanship of "the [superior] logic of non-standard English" (Labov 1972). "Larry," Labov's "paradigmatic" exemplar of a speaker of Black English Vernacular "can sum up a complex argument in a few words, and the full force of his opinion comes through without qualification or reservation. He is eminently quotable . . ." (Labov 1972:215). "He does not wander, or insert meaningless verbiage . . ." (ibid. 216).

Without laboring the point too much, I would like to suggest that Labov stands to Larry in something of the same adoring (and self-loathing) posture as every starry-eyed weebegone Wunderkind has stood in our long and complicated Western tradition to the working class stud he dreams up, and dreams of, but despairs of imitating: as the sickly and bespectacled Friedrich Nietzsche (also a linguist) stood to the blonde (later also blue-eyed and Aryan) beast that he invented in the *Genealogy of Morals*; as Dave Barry stood to the disadvantaged kids of Camp Sharparoon; as the shy bespectacled genius Isaac Babel stood to virile brigands like Benya Krik in his *Odessa Stories* and beautiful Cossacks like Savitsky in his *Red Cavalry* tales; as Merle Miller stood to Harry S. Truman in his aptly titled best selling biography *Plain Speaking*; as Woody Allen stood to his fantasy of Humphrey Bogart in *Play It Again, Sam*; and as Leonard Bernstein stood to the Black Panthers in Tom Wolfe's devastatingly satirical *Radical Chic*.

If modern advertising and pop culture, the adulation of plain

speaking is not only a celebration of masculinity, but also of the common folk. We see the populist strand in the glamorization of doggedly unglamorous "real people" as represented not only by Jeff McNelly's idealizations of "Pluggers," but by contemporary advertising campaigns for beef and beer, virtually incomprehensible in themselves, which can be understood as a kind of reaction against the glitz of the star system, with its extreme glorification of impossibly affectless, sophisticated, hip, and glamorous models or the proverbial rich and famous icons of the real world. *The Waitons, Little House on the Prairie, Garrison Keillor's "Lake Wobegon," Jeff McNelly's Pluggers, and Country & Western music* in general may be celebrating the same folksiness, sincerity and authenticity whose artist laureate one generation ago was Norman Rockwell.

A more complex example, one in which anti-intellectualism is more clearly identified as a manly virtue, and tightly associated with downright sexual hostility, is provided by a recent Michael J. Fox-at-the-opera Pepsi commercial in which the waggish scamp deflates his prissy date by rushing out of the concert hall in mid-aria to grab a Pepsi and winds up as the star of the show. It is probably an only half-conscious and fully unintentional aspect of this brilliant commercial that it resonates with one of the central themes of American literature, Huck Finn's flight from "civilization":

The Widow Douglas she took me for her son, and allowed she would civilize me; but it was rough living in the house all the time, considering how dismaldecent and regular the widow was in all her ways; and so when I couldn't stand it no longer I lit out. I got into my old rags and my sugar-hogshead again, and was free and satisfied. (Twain 1960:2)

Unconscious it may be: but there is no mistaking the spiritual kinship of the blithe Michael J. Fox with Mark Twain's plain-speaking unlettered Huckleberry Finn, or the identity of das ewig weibliche with the Widow Douglas. That this is a staple treatment of sexual relationships in a great deal of American literature has been cogently argued by Leslie Fiedler (Fiedler 1960).

Closely allied with this populist tradition, I believe, is our emphatically non-egalitarian obeisance to strong silent stoics like those portrayed by Humphrey Bogart, Marlon Brando, Clint Eastwood, Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and countless others, exponents of the tough and laconic "Make my day," "read my lips" school of understatement.

In *The Godfather*, the inarticulate Don Corleone hardly says a word, and when he does, it is clear that the English language is not his natural medium. In *The Last Action Hero*, a young boy trapped in Miss Gundy's Shakespeare class fantasizes Schwarzenegger as a cigar-chomping Hamlet, who blows Claudius away with the memorable words "You killed my father: big mistake."

Plain blunt words of one syllable (and no more than four letters) are prized in this tradition for their pungent eloquence as well as for their honesty. Labov contrasts them with what he derisively calls "OK words" (like *science*, *culture*, and *intoxicate*), which advertise their mealy-mouthed speakers to be people of the middle class (ibid. 220). Here, in contrast, is Labov's fifteen-year old juvenile delinquent "Larry" on heaven:

An' when they be sayin' if you good, you goin' t' heaven, tha's bullshit, 'cause you ain't goin' to no heaven, 'cause it ain't no heaven for you to go to. (ibid. 215)

and on why God is a white man:

Cause the average whitey out here got everything, you dig?  
And the nigger ain't got shit, y'know? Y'unnerstan? So—  
uñ—in order for *that* to happen, you know it ain't no black  
God that's doin' that bullshit (ibid. 217)

It's only one step from the idealization of four-letter words to the worship of total silence and the concomitant disdain for fluency and language in general. Talk is cheap, actions speak louder than words, poetry is for sissies, and real men (strong silent hunks like Clint Eastwood and Sylvester Stallone) either don't talk at all, or, like Harry Truman, are reticent about their inner feelings. Like Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather*, they may if necessary condescend to *buy* fast-talking (vaguely effeminate, typically Jewish) mouthpieces to do their talking for them, and deal with the likes of the IRS, but inconsequential chitchat—and this is underlined—is almost beneath their dignity.

Real men will tolerate the jibber jabber of fluent wordsmiths—lawyers, pundits, spin doctors, poets, speech writers, admen, schoolmarms, journalists, politicians, academic nerds in general—in a word, *wimps* only with contemptuous reluctance, and always view them—if they view them at all—with the thinly veiled disdain

which the salt of the earth reserve for gigolos, Maitre D's, Marcel Proust, and fans of Grand Opera. In the company of such men, it is a badge of virility to flout the rules of grammar of the only language that you know: grammaticality (to say nothing of multilingualism) is for schoolmarms and pantywaists.

"Over in Europe, the comic foreigners are gabbling and gesticulating." Thus Orwell captured the chauvinist mindset of British "Boys' Weeklies" in 1939: how unlike the British stoicism of the explorer Stanley, who finally tracking down the missionary-explorer Dr. Livingstone in the heart of darkest Africa, greeted him with only the immortal words "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?" But to see how this same mindset grips the (middle) American imagination today, "imagine" Arnold Schwarzenegger speaking German (which of course he does). Imagine Johnny Weismuller—politely?!—saying not "Me Tarzan—You Jane" but "My name is Tarzan, and I think you will agree it spoils the effect. Let the tightlipped schoolmarms enunciate, and let the limp-wristed nerds lisp "OK words" like "therapy" and "relationships": real men avoid the softness of grammatical expression like the taint of effeminacy.

However much Americans overtly value the articulate fluency of effete snobs, we also more or less covertly worship the eloquence of a laconic aristocracy of brutes. Trudgill 1972 provided a sober and scholarly demonstration of this disparity in Great Britain: while women in general aspire to emulate the likes of William Buckley and the proverbially asexual arbiters of grammaticality—like Mark Twain's the widow Douglas and James Thurber's schoolmarm Miss Groby (Thurber 1945a)—men (at least the men of Norwich, England) aspire to imitate the rugged virile macho working class hood, who (as Dave Barry pictured him) dropped out of school and was fucking every girl on the block at about the same age they entered high school. When Bismark sneered at fluency in foreign languages as a "fine talent for headwaiters," and dismissed parliamentary majorities in favour of blood and iron, he anticipated not only the blond beast of Aryan mythologizing, but our own American versions of this figure, the Marlboro Man, and his city-slicker equivalent, the hard-bitten private eye.

Our half-acknowledged obeisance to strong silent godfathers and urban samurai is perhaps covert, but utterly sincere. It is not only out in the open but fully institutionalized in many other social groups. Among the Wolof of Senegal (as well as other societies in the Western Sahel), Judith Irvine has shown that a laconic and semi-articulate way of speaking

(*waxu géér*) is associated with *nobles*, while a verbose and fluent style (*waxu gawel*) is associated with *lower caste* speakers. Like Don Corleone in *The Godfather*, the nobles mumble, stammer, and make grammatical mistakes:

... correctness would be an unnecessary frill, an emphasis on fluency of performance or performance for its own sake, which would not be *appropriate*—or perhaps even possible—for these highest nobles (Irvine 1990:140 emphasis added).

The nobility let glib lower caste griots do their talking for them. The speech of these praise-singers and go-betweens is not only phonetically and syntactically correct to the point of prissiness, but “replete with emphatic devices, parallelisms, and ideophones” (ibid. 140), and gabbed at a rate of up to 300 syllables a minute (ibid. 137).

Since these mouthpieces are ‘expressive vehicles’ (ibid. 135), and ‘message bearers’ (ibid. 150), their lack of sincerity is axiomatic:

In the Wolof communicative system, the display of affect (or the person who expresses an idea) need not be the same person who possesses it. A griot may display emotion on behalf of a noble, to whom the emotion is attributed, but who sits by impassively. (ibid. 150)

Apparently, however, griots are not for that reason treated with the same suspicion and contempt that we lavish on schoolmarms, Mafia lawyers and other hired verbal guns. The restraint of the nobles, and the volubility of the griots, are instead compared by Wolof speakers to “a good set of brakes” and “a strong engine,” both of which are necessary for a working car (ibid. 153). Still, the strong silent noble is the one whose actions have consequences, and whose words, however inarticulate, are attended to. Let the griots, like Orwell’s comical foreigners, jabber and gesticulate. But when the nobles talk, people will strain their ears to listen.

Because our cult of plain speaking is *so* familiar, and because parallels in other times and traditions are so easy to identify, it is tempting to see our idealization as a veiled expression (with admittedly local peculiarities) of a *universal* attitude which other cultures have ritualized, but this is clearly not the case. The cult of plain speaking, although widespread, is a cultural artefact.

To judge from the impressions of students of Javanese, notably Mead, Bateson, Geertz, Siegel, and Wolfowitz, etiquette, elaboration, insincerity, and alienation are seen not only as the hallmarks of civilization, but as the kind of good breeding that everyone aspired to in order to be fully human.

We plain-speaking buffs may despise sentimentousness, but: “one has arrived, in Javanese, when one has come to enjoy making the obvious comment at the proper time in an appropriate tone . . . (Keeler:358 apud Wolfowitz 1991:58)

We (PSB’s) regard alienation as a disability, but:

This state of weakened emotional investment in one’s immediate environment, of self-induced distance and disciplined aloofness from all events in the transient world of men . . . is among the most valued of Javanese feeling patters, *iklas* (=“detachment”). (Geertz 1960:53 apud Wolfowitz op. cit. 59)

We may claim to deride hypocrisy, but:

to the Javanese, “pretence”—*etok-etok*—is without any devaluing connotations and is positively valued as a good way to deal with troublesome situations. (H. Geertz 1961:134 apud Wolfowitz op. cit. 64)

Psychotherapy aims to liberate *us* from repression, but:

It is . . . formal style that embodies the dominant cultural value, “refinement” (*alus*), a consistent negation of the spontaneous, dramatic, and self-expressive elements in social interaction. Refinement, conventionally framed in opposition to the negative value *kasar* (“coarse, rough, crude”) constitutes a cornerstone of Javanese personal philosophy and aesthetics. (Wolfowitz, op. cit. 69)

Plain speaking exists among the Javanese as well as among every other social group, and is normal between siblings, spouses, and used by young children to other family members: it is characterized as laconic, elliptical, and abruptly intoned “almost as if the activities of speaking, moving, and interpreting constitute a burden to be avoided as far as possible” (Wolfowitz 87).

### 2. The incoherence of the cult

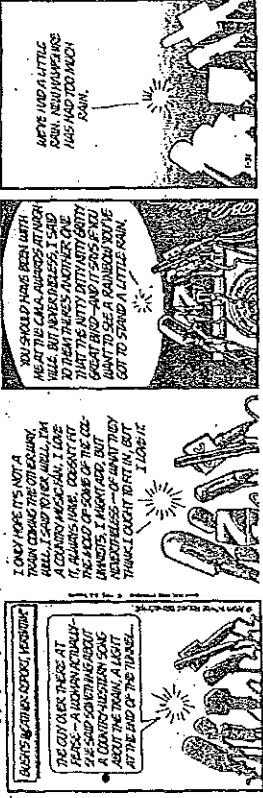
Like every ideology, the cult of plain speaking is a socially constructed reality: it is of interest not for what it says about the "salt and earth," but for what it reveals about ourselves, as the people who put it together and subscribe to it. In evaluating the validity of this cult, I will therefore pass over whether or not the blue collar male happens to be anything like what Dave Barry or Isaac Babel imagine him to be, and consider only whether the idealization of plain speaking is logically consistent on purely internal grounds.

I believe that it is logically invalid for two reasons, articulated by Mikhail Bakhtin and Ferdinand de Saussure. First, because the self-consciousness involved in choosing to employ PS clearly marks it as an essentially arbitrary affectation no different from any other consciously chosen mode of behaviour, plain speaking is never plain: it is at best "plain." Second, because all language is already artificial, all speaking is unplain by design.

But before I do these things, I should try to defend myself against the reasonable charge that I am flogging a dead horse. Surely in a thoroughly urban culture, worship of brutes is an anachronism. (Indeed, Philip Slater suggests that even Herakles was difficult for the Athenians to take altogether seriously for this very reason (Slater 1968:339). And surely in American popular culture, where self-reference, irony, and satire are virtually the mother tongue of everybody with a TV set, where every naive ideal exists virtually only as its caricatured representation in parody, there is no need to belabor such an unresisting imbecility: hasn't the destruction of the cult been consummated by experts already?

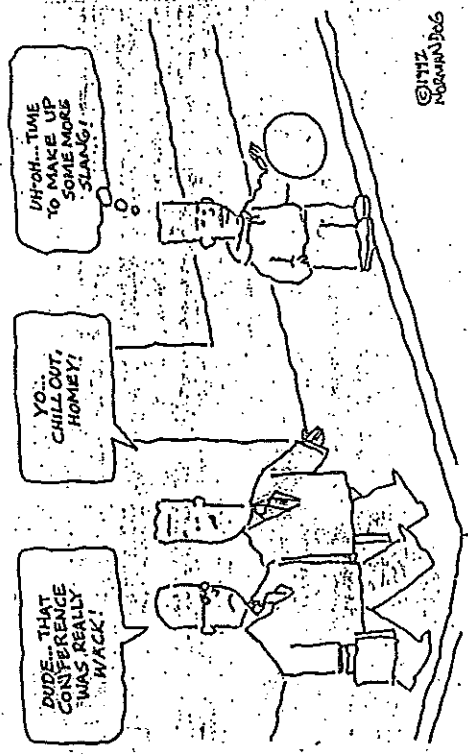
I would say that the answer is, surprisingly, no. To be sure, the cult of PS does figure in a very large number of satirical treatments by

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writers, filmmakers, and cartoonists, from James Thurber's "The secret life of Walter Mitty" to Woody Allen's *Play it again, Sam*, and from Norman Dog to Garry Trudeau, but when we look closely at these works, it is clear that what the satirist derides is always the nerd, and never the validity of his dream of masculinity.



Bush is pathetic when he tries to talk Country and Western or use four letter words. So are the two executives trying to talk BEV. But C&W and BEV are still the language of real men. Walter Mitty is pathetic in his daydreams of tightlipped manly valor:

Pandemonium broke loose in the courtroom. A woman's scream rose above the bedlam, and suddenly a lovely, dark-haired girl was in Walter Mitty's arms. The District Attorney struck at her savagely. Without rising from his chair, Mitty let the man have it on the point of the chin. 'You miserable cur!' (Thurber 1945:50)

But what makes Thurber's story an enduring tragedy is the aching reality of the gap between Mitty's dream and the henpecked life he leads. And we can say the same of Woody Allen's vision of "Humphrey Bogart."

For all our cynicism and hipness, the cult of PS is one we believe sincerely. Dagwood Burnstead, Woody Allen, Walter Mitty, George Bush, and all the other wanna be heroes are absurd. The actual heroes are not: the hard-bitten action heroes portrayed by countless actors from John Wayne to Bruce Willis have not been deconstructed, or at least not in any readily accessible or familiar work that I am aware of. And it is in the absence of such deconstruction that I offer the following remarks.

### 2.1. Bakhtin's rejoinder

Some modes of speaking may be thought of as masks which disguise the speaker's true self: politeness and irony come to mind, as do affectations and play-acting in general. We owe to Bakhtin a profound rhetorical question: what makes us so sure that there is any mode of speech which is truly a "face," and not just another "mask?" In particular, what makes us think that the brutal laconic style of the Godfathers of this world is not a freely chosen mask?

In fact, if we consider the strong silent actors on our own cultural stage, it is apparent that the plain speech they utter (and which we so idealize) may be no less of an affectation than Japanese *alus* "refinement," Japanese *erryo* "polite formality," or the most florid gobbledygook. I have already suggested that the fictional Godfather embodies the virtues of the Wolf of nobility. What about the genuine article? Here is Norman Lewis discoursing on the original Godfather, Don Calogero Vizzini, and the Sicilian cult of *omertà* which he so perfectly embodied:

Don Calo never confused the shadow with the substance of power, and saw no reason why he should ever be compelled to speak an emasculated Italian rather than the vigorous local dialect (. . .) he remained an illiterate all his life, a state of affairs from which he seemed to derive positive satisfaction . . . (Lewis 1964 [1984]:46).

Always laconic, indeed almost incomprehensible to the barons and politicians he sometimes dealt with (as he did, for example, when dividing up postwar Italy), patricians who spoke standard Italian (ibid. 113), Don Calo achieved at least partly by virtue of his very silence a tremendous charisma:

. . . the Johnsonian pithiness of his rare but massive utterances, the majestic finality of his opinions, appealed to the human search for leadership. Even (sic!) men of education and intellectuals admitted their susceptibility to a strange power of attraction not uncommonly possessed by a capo-mafia . . . (ibid. 21)

Up to this point, Lewis might well be lavishing on the Sicilian Mafioso the same almost worshipful respect that Labov showered on his paradigmatic inner city badass teen.

Yet, Lewis matter-of-factly speaks of Don Calogero's brevity and peasant earthiness as on a par with his slovenly dress—"typical Mafia affectations" (ibid. 21) which are resolutely cultivated:

It was not done for a Mafia chieftain to show off in the matter of his clothing or any other way, and sometimes, in Don Calo's case, this lack of concern for appearance was carried to extremes (ibid. 21).

Most interesting, Lewis regards Don Calogero's schlump chic as akin to a stoical suppression of the self:

The mafioso . . . developed a kind of self-control closely resembling that quality known as *giri* [= 'constraint'] by the Japanese, and so much admired by them.<sup>2</sup> A true man of honour never weakened his position or armed his enemy in advance by outbursts of passion or of fear. (ibid. 30)

At this point, we may turn to a famous Japanese exemplar of Plain Speaking, the poet-priest Ryookan (1758-1831), whose *Kaigo* "Prohibitions" is a collection of aphorisms concerning daily conversation. Among the things prohibited are:

An excess of words; glibness; speaking pretentiously; saying things in a kindly seeming manner; speech reeking of the scholar; speech reeking of elegance; speech reeking of Zen enlightenment; speech reeking of the tea master.

In all things, words should be spoken with sincerity. (Doi 1986:118-20). In other words, Ryookan's advice is: "*cultivate* (sic) simplicity and

sincerity. It is very hard to do, and there are countless pitfalls to be avoided in the dedicated and conscious pursuit of it. That is why it is so rare. And that is why I have written the *Kaigo*."

We have come all the way back from the artifice of *emryo* "self-control", via plain speaking, to *giri* "constraint, obligation." But we never left artifice behind.

And this same paradoxical juxtaposition of plain speaking with a stiff (almost Japanese) upper lip occurs in Miller's heroic plugger, Harry Truman. On the one hand, he "spoke his mind":

Harry's words were never fancy, but they were never obscure either. You never had to try to figure out what Harry was up to; he told you what he was up to . . . there was not a duplicitous bone in his body. He was without guile . . . (Merle Miller 1973:15).

But on the other hand, he was what we would call emotionally repressed to the point of practising Javanese *alus*:

Did he weep? Did he curse the fates? Did he shake his fist at the thunder? If he ever did, he did it in private. Lincoln was an outwardly melancholy man; Harry Truman was not. His melancholy, if any, was all buttoned up inside him. He never, to use a phrase several of his contemporaries used in describing him, wore his heart on his sleeve. How are you? I'm fine. And you? (Ibid. 29)

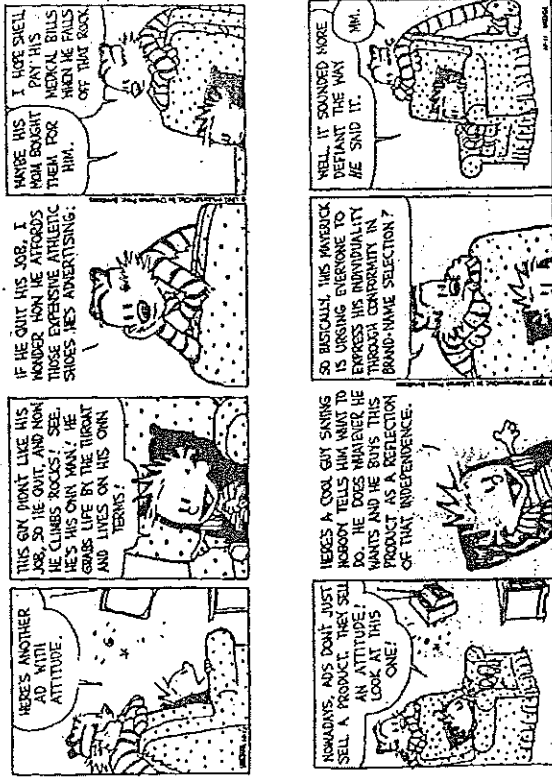
Needless to say, Merle Miller, his hagiographer, finds both Truman's salty language and his stoicism equally and totally admirable. But whatever else we can say or think, speaking your mind ("he told you what he was up to") and being buttoned up ("he did it in private") are clearly mutually contradictory. That the fact does not occur to Miller suggests that the virtue that he worships is laconic machismo, not sincerity, and most emphatically, not the unrestrained self-revelation of psychobabble, the histrionics of which Miller probably regards with as much contempt as Woody Allen's "Humphrey Bogart" did, or as Bismarck regarded the fluency of headwaiters.

According to Doi, this suppression of the self—classic *emryo*—is also at the very heart of the Japanese sage Ryookan's charm: he never

spoke about himself (Doi 1986:119), thus possessing one of the "two essential qualities of the human being who has charm: an interior life that is indiscernible from the outside . . ." (Ibid. 120)

Being a man (and it is always a man) of few pithy words is an artificial achievement: the noble savage achieves his stoical nobility by the calculated suppression of his self.

I would go further and contend against the extreme relativism of anthropologists like Michelle Rosaldo and Kenneth Read (who claim to have rediscovered the noble savage living free and speaking from the heart among the Ilongot of the Philippines and the Gahuku-Gama of New Guinea) that the concept of artifice and etiquette is already implicit in the very notion of obligation itself: a human society in which there is never any tension between what one wants and what one does seems entirely unimaginable to me (although it may well be that "lighting out for the territory" with Huck Finn or the Marlboro Man represents a fantasy of total freedom from this constraint to the American viewer).





## 2.2 Saussure's rejoinder

Obligation and artifice are equally implicit in the very idea of language as a system of *signs*: by this definition, all languages, however simple, offer their speakers the means to lie, and all speakers, no matter how disfluent, do so. If it's true, guaranteed power, sincerity and spontaneity we're after, we can no more find them in familial speech among the Javanese, the disfluencies of Wolof nobility, the mumbblings of Don Corleone, "Larry"'s raps on God, Dirty Harry's one-liners, the aphorisms of Ryookan, or the wit and wisdom of Harry Truman, than in the sayings of Joe Isuzu, Vladimir Nabokov, Edward Gibbon, or Jacques Derrida. Nor can we find them in true confessions, whether these are addressed to one's priest or therapist. We can only find them in *symptomatic communication*: prelinguistic cries, moans, and grunts. Compared to these, all talk—even the "clear and effective" and "eminently quotable" speech of Labov's paradigm speakers of Black English Vernacular—is cheap, or at least a matter of affectation.

Speakers using language in general are *eo ipso* alienated from the emotions they describe. For, once they control them sufficiently to use language, they are not merely expressing them, they are describing them as well: no longer merely, or even primarily, participants, they have become observers and exorcists of their emotional turmoil. And this is true no matter how much sincerity they speak with. Not for nothing is displacement listed as one of the design features of human language.

In noting that "on eut dit que son sentiment s'en allait avec ses paroles," Gide echoed an oft-repeated insight (Gide, 66).

In part it is the nature of Javanese that its speakers can practice the emotional detachment (*iklas*) they so much value by speaking of things in order to avoid being possessed by them. Thus, Javanese dislike being surprised, and consequently they exclaim *lho* indicating they are surprised, in order to avoid feeling it. (Siegel 1986:27 apud Wolfowitz op. cit. 60)

Rather than external signs, which the speaker chooses, uses, and searches among for the "not just" or the best "costume" in a kind of verbal dress-up game, autistic prelinguistic cries are internal signs which emanate from the speaker involuntarily. They are "literally expressive" (Fonagy 1971:170), or "presentative" rather than re-presentative, (Bolinger

1985:98) signals. Only in the case of expressive language, can we assert that "what I do is me," and nothing else.

Expressions are not a sign of anything in the world other than the speaker's state. (This is similar to the claim made by Searle (1979) in his taxonomy of speech acts: expressive illocutionary acts neither fit the external world, nor do they attempt to make the external world fit them. Searle's expressions, however, include linguistic expressions like "Congratulations!," all of which are capable of being uttered insincerely. I use the term "expression" only for involuntary symptoms.)

It may be because of its private nature that an expression—even a conventionalized linguistic pseudo-expression—can be directly quoted, but resists indirect quotation (cf. Banfield 1982):

1. a) He cried "Yuki!"
- b) \*He cried that Yuk.

Conventional grammar to the contrary, direct and indirect quotation are entirely different speech acts. Direct quotation is fundamentally an act of mimicry or playacting: the quoter pretends to be the person quoted. Indirect quotation is an act of translation: the quoter translates the utterance of the original speaker into his or her own frame of reference, which may differ from that of the original speaker not only with respect to conventional shifters like tense and deixis, but also concerning what these two people think they know about the world.

An actor or mimic may put herself in the speaker's place, but nobody can *translate* the speaker's private emotions into her own frame of reference.

In fact, expletives like "Yuk," of which English has a large number, although they are in fact linguistic signs, are conceived as the expression of auditory gestures which are not linguistic. Such paralinguistic "unmonitored, purely physiological externalizations of an inner state" (Couper-Kuhlen 1986:174), including whimpers, moans, squeals, laughter, sobbing, yells, sighs, grunts, and hums, are not only available to speakers of all languages, but shared in large part by other animals. "Yuk" is already a language-specific verbalization (compare German "pfui", Dakota "xox," etc.) of a universal gesture of revulsion, which is only partially (and, perhaps, accidentally) auditory in expression. There seems to be a yawning chasm between *symptoms* such as screaming with pain, bellowing with rage, or howling with laughter, on the one hand, and *signs* (even non-indirect

quotable "E" signs such as "Ouch," "Damn," or "God!" on the other (cf. Buehler 1934, Bolinger 1985). It seems likely to me, however, that the admittedly profound contrast between expression and description, like many other categorial distinctions in languages, should be replaced by some kind of hierarchy of possibilities (cf. Stankiewicz 1964). At its irreducibly animal base are paralinguistic purely expressive and involuntary signs like <laughter>, <sobs>, <bellows of rage>, <squeals of pain>, and so forth. Higher on the hierarchy are conventionalized epithets like "mmm," "yuk," "ouch," "aha," "wow," "hurray," "bah," oaths and imprecations, and invocations of the deity. These betray their expressive status through their inability to occur as indirect quotations or translations, and undoubtedly owe some of their expressive power to their violation of linguistic etiquette and convention at various levels. For example, <negative grunts> contain the glottal stop, <brrrr> "it's cold" consists of a non-phoneme, and <mmm> violates constraints on canonical syllable structure, in English. Oaths like "fuck \_\_\_\_!" clearly own their expressive power to the violation of purely social taboos on mention of the sacred or the polluted. Exclamations like "Jesus H. Christ!," "You idiot!," and "Lucky little Rupert!" are non-propositional. Even higher on the hierarchy of expressive insincerity are highly syntacticed constructions like "\_\_\_\_ the hell," which can occur in utterances containing full propositions, such as

2. What *the hell* are you talking about?

and which therefore *can* be indirectly quoted. It is notable, however, that these are of ambiguous origin. In the indirect quotation (2a):

2. a) She asked what the hell they were talking about.

it is possible that the quoter is reproducing the original speaker's exasperation (in which case (2a) is a translation of (2)), or interpolating his own (in which case (2a) is both a translation of, and an editorial on (2)).

Most verbal, and most descriptive, are thoroughly conventional declarative propositions with their grammatical shoelaces tied, like:

- 3\* a) You are a fool.  
 b) I am angry.  
 c) I am angry at you.  
 d) I am proud of you.

- e) I am very angry and impatient.  
 f) I think Irma is very lucky  
 g) I think she is an amazing woman.

I propose that a speaker negotiating the hierarchy between a gag reflex, "Yuk!," "Gross!" and "That's gross!" then, is moving between relatively spontaneous, sincere, and involuntary expression, on the one hand, and cool, objective, detached, *alienated* description, on the other.

Expletives and epithets in English often subsist at different stages of this (ontogenetic and possibly phylogenetic) hierarchy of expressive sincerity. It is notable, for example, that "ouch" and "ow" are on different rungs, the former more conventionalized and therefore less expressive than the latter.

What is involved in the gradual taming of emotive expressions is their conversion from symptoms, which are part of the speaker, to consciously selected signals, which are external to him. In expressing his emotions by means of linguistic signs, objects of an alien origin, the speaker is alienating himself from the emotions which they represent in the most iconic fashion possible. (Compare Muecke's observation that "the concept of detachment seems to be implicit in the concept of pretence, since the ironist's ability to pretend attests a degree of control over more immediate responses." (Muecke 1970:36))

All humans with conventional language of one kind or another do this: this much alienation and detachment and *enryo* is simply a unique and characteristic part of being human, no matter how plain the language that we speak.

### Conclusion

I have attempted to sketch here the description of a metaphorical attitude towards language, and some of its ramifications. The attitude is that language may be plain or fancy. Like architecture, it may be Dorian or Corinthian, Bauhaus or baroque. Like music, it may be plain song or polyphonic, rap or Grand Opera. Honesty and sincerity, in all cases, are associated with the first choice, that of simplicity and brevity:

Es trägt Verstand und rechter Sinn  
 mit wenig Kunst sich selber vor (Faust I:550-1)

I have also tried to show, however, that the attitude (which, incidentally, I cannot help but share) is fundamentally invalid for two reasons. The first is the postmodernist reason that any mode of behaviour which is freely chosen from a menu, as it were, is chosen with some degree of self-consciousness, and is therefore ineluctably artificial.<sup>3</sup> (Not for nothing do languages like German systematically confuse free will and arbitrariness.) The second reason is that all language consisting as it does of "mere words" is essentially arbitrary and artificial. At this level of abstraction, Bakhtin and Saussure are saying exactly the same thing. Human language, in fact, may be the quintessential post-modernist phenomenon

### Notes

- 1 Offered food or drink, a guest may take only a little. The host may protest "Don't do *enryo!*" (The example from Satoko Suzuki.) Hence, *enryo* as politeness, suppression of one's inner wants. For a lengthy survey of much of the literature, see Wierzbicka 1991, and the much fuller explication offered there (1991:352).
- 2 In modern Japan, girls give chocolate to their valentines. Recently, the custom has arisen of giving "*giri* chocolates" to co-workers, for whom one has no sentimental feelings. (Again, the example is furnished by Satoko Suzuki.) Hence, we may deduce the meanings of etiquette, formality, insincerity. Again, Wierzbicka provides a sensitive survey of the changing definitions of *giri*, culminating in a comprehensive explication (1991:376). From Wierzbicka's careful summary, it seems that Lewis's use of *Mafioso giri* includes a meaning ("obligation to revenge") which is no longer current.
- 3 Throughout this essay I have been dealing with an attitude towards language which regards plain speaking, not as "neutral," but as heavily steeped in very specific macho virtues. I therefore note, but take no particular interest in, Barthe's arguments (1970) against the possibility of such a neutral mode of unmarked "degree zero" discourse.

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### What is unique about American English?

As was noted in the Preface, a major issue of the conference concerned the question of what is meant by American English. What we should attempt to do is specify what unique features American English possesses. In order to be able to do this in a sensible way, we have to fix at least two things. First, we have to provide a reference point, with respect to which we can characterize American English. I will choose standard British English as a reference point. Second, we have to settle on the variety of American English that is used in the comparison. As can be expected, I will choose standard American English for this purpose. The more specific questions that I propose to raise are the following: Given the well-known linguistic differences between standard British English and standard American English, why do we have just those differences that exist, and why not others? What was the general direction of the changes? What forces have been at work that shaped American English to give its distinct present-day form?

J.L. Dillard's work (eg., Dillard, 1975, 1985, 1992), summarized in Chapter 1, is a large part of the answer to these questions. But there is also a neglected area of research on American English, which I call the "intellectual traditions" approach (see Kövecses, 1995), that may explain aspects of American English that cannot be accounted for by social history alone. In this approach, emphasis falls on intellectual history, rather than social history, though obviously social and intellectual history are, to a large degree, inseparable. This emphasis makes the approach akin to those favored by literary historian David Simpson (1986), cultural historian Kenneth Cmiel (1990), and language historian Dennis Baron (1982). Following Simpson, Cmiel, and Baron, in Kövecses (1995) I attempted to provide an explanation of a large number of linguistic phenomena that are specific to, or, at least, characteristic of, American English in the light of several major intellectual traditions. Nevertheless, no claim is made that this work (ie., Kövecses, 1995) is an intellectual history of American English. What I attempted to do was simply suggest a connection between certain linguistic phenomena and certain intellectual