

REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Verbal Hygiene*

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Deborah Cameron, Verbal Hygiene, London: Routledge, 1995. 264 pages.

Deborah Cameron names and describes a familiar and time-honoured stream in the discourse on language: those value-laden prescriptions and proscriptions about language use and the debates they engender, what she calls “verbal hygiene.” This genre includes those “practices ... born of an urge to improve or ‘clean up’ language” and constitutes “a single (and normative) activity: a struggle to control language by defining its nature” (p. 8).

As educators, we are familiar with the phenomenon of verbal hygiene through a number of its specific manifestations — the style guides we recommend to our students, literacy initiatives, assertiveness training, political correctness, linguistic equality, the plain language movement, employers’ anxieties about our graduates’ workplace writing skills, and our self-appointed correction of the grammar and style of others’ documents. Many of us are also avid participants in other popular practices of verbal hygiene — perhaps as writers of letters-to-the-editor lamenting the decay of our language or lambasting a barbarous usage, or as anxious parents calling for grammar drill and a return to the good old days of standards and basic literacy. To some extent, we are all language mavens, partial to certain practices of verbal hygiene, sometimes throwing our own glove down in a battle over language use or change.

Deborah Cameron isn’t advocating against such practices. In fact, she wants to validate the concerns that lay people and non-linguists so passionately display about language, and to encourage linguists to take these concerns seriously. Cameron me-

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ticulously documents example after example to show that such debates about language use do not usually rise above emotionalism, and she mounts a serious case for a more rational approach in which the experts — linguists — are committed participants. And, while Cameron repeatedly broaches the territory of these debates, she is careful to avoid an easy polemic against certain groups and their linguistic predilections.

Her research suggests that language debates mask real issues of self-interest, ranging from the promotion and inflation of the value of public style guides, to the profitable exploitation of sexual difference in the name of helping women “talk like men,” and politically vested calls for a back-to-basics curriculum that will purportedly stem the tide of illiteracy.

She expressly hovers at the edges of the debates themselves, maintaining instead the stance of a researcher investigating and observing the participants and the phenomenon. All who contribute to the discourse of verbal hygiene are participants — teachers, parents, feminists, editors, politicians, and speech therapists. The debates comprise not only those for and against a certain linguistic practice, but they also pit verbal hygienists against professional linguists. The hygienists often claim to represent the interests of those who either don't know better (students), are disempowered (women), or are seeking material advancement (professionals in media, business, and industry). Linguists, for their part, often adopt dismissive attitudes towards popular causes aimed at regulating language: they espouse the view that language can't be manipulated by “unnatural” human intervention, and that authentic language change is a result of real social change — a view that often merely aggravates the tensions of the debate. As a result, Cameron argues, the underlying social and political motivations can remain unexpressed while arguments over the desirability of tampering with the language dominate the discussion.

Cameron's purpose is to focus on this underlayer of vested interests, in the first place by validating the debates themselves. She wishes to encourage linguists (and others) to be curious about a phenomenon of language they normally eschew — popular and passionately expressed attitudes toward language use. She points out that, as a phenomenon of language, this should be a logical part of a linguist's professional inquiry. Cameron spares neither the self-seekers who appropriate a verbal hygiene debate for their own ends, nor the linguists who, in her view, have largely abdicated their role and function as researchers and responsible commentators on language use. She provides examples of both profit-driven strategies that capitalize on people's fears about their linguistic performance and of experts' professionally disinterested judgements about the practices of verbal hygiene, judgements that can be as non-rational as those often expressed by self-proclaimed language reformers.

Cameron begins by defining and explaining what verbal hygiene practices are, and why both the practices and the debates they evoke should invite scholarly inquiry. Within this framework, she analyzes four popular and powerful verbal hygiene movements: stylistic restriction in the publishing industry, the great grammar crusade in England and Wales in the 1980s, political correctness, and verbal hygiene practices aimed at women. Her conclusions do not aim to promote her own preferred responses to the questions she has raised, but function more as an incitement to linguists to extend and develop the inquiry she has initiated here, and to scrutinize as a legitimate and important force the attitudes and motives behind the promotion of verbal hygiene practices. It is on this territory, she argues, that “linguistic authoritarianism” must be fought. Such an inquiry is necessary to “challenge verbal hygiene practices we find objectionable, to defend those we see value in, and to decide which are which”; to “pose searching questions about who prescribes for whom, what they prescribe, how, and for what purposes” (pp. 10–11).

Cameron elaborates the main themes of verbal hygiene debates, and these become the backdrop for her case-study analyses. First, she critiques the often invoked yet faulty binarism of prescriptive versus descriptive language use. Even though linguists disclaim a prescriptive stance, their descriptions of the regularities or norms of language use are generally treated by ordinary users as prescriptions; and their own evaluative stance is therefore mystified by the pose of objectivity. The difference between the two becomes merely “academic.” The second theme, standardization, she describes as an ideology dependent upon “a circle of intimidation” that is created as apprentices in the practices of verbal hygiene (such as teachers and copy editors) master their craft and experience an “inbuilt incentive to defend it” (14–5).

The third theme is the assumption that only “natural” language change is acceptable, as opposed to changes imposed by human intervention. The “natural” can be invoked for contradictory reasons — either to show that a change, such as “he/she” or “they,” follows naturally from changes in gender equality, or to show such a change is unnatural because society has not sufficiently changed. In such debates, she argues, the real issue is not naturalness but who is “master” over language use: it is always ideological, having to do with the speaker, whether it is media spin doctors, military spokespersons, African-Americans, or gays.

Cameron also examines the language-as-communication hypothesis. She argues that the appeal to consistency as essential to communication depends on misunderstanding communication as the “exact transfer of ideas” (p. 24). In practice, any competent user expects language to be indeterminate and flexible, and so strategizes around these contingencies to arrive at an approximate, but workable, interpretation of the discourse at hand. She insists that the real issue instead is the

fear of the “other” — the threat of social fragmentation in the face of diversity — and she suggests that this anxiety is what motivates organizations such as The Queen’s English Society and the “racist and xenophobic US English movement” (p. 21) to promote certain traditional practices in the name of “consistency.”

This coexistence of the postmodern values of diversity and variation, on the one hand, and those of globalization and standardization, on the other, seem to define the ground on which verbal hygiene debates are waged. Cameron rather convincingly shows this to be the case in her chapters on the rules of style, grammar instruction, and political correctness.

For Cameron, the craft professionals of style in publishing and journalism, those who enforce the rules, are epitomized in the “all but invisible” copy editor (p. 34). Her numerous interviews with these professionals reveal that many take a certain pride in the knowledge and practice of hyperstandardization (even and especially over trivial and less-known rules), and they defend the ideology of standardization with the predictable criteria of consistency, clarity, and correctness. Cameron critiques this ideology as an illusion, arguing that there is much more variety in practice than is acknowledged by craft professionals, and she faults this ideology for equating variation with “deviance.”

In her view, the criteria of “good style” are products of the craft tradition itself, setting readers’ expectations and serving specific professional interests. She cites examples of linguistic crises that result in the creation of new markets for products of verbal hygiene such as videos, software programs, and special workshops. Market forces thus reproduce the conflict between diversity (as competing standards) and consistency (as hyperstandardization). Published style guides, for example, are depicted as competing commodities that promote different kinds of standardization.

Moreover, each version of “the standard” is depicted by Cameron as a subjective construction whose subjectivity becomes mystified and unchallenged over time. She describes *The [London] Times’* style guide, which was marketed publicly for the first time in 1992, as the product of “a steady accretion of personal idiosyncrasies turned into rules ... and then into custom and practice”; and she asserts that “this sedimentary process leads to mystification, the automatic restatement of rules whose origins and rationale no one can remember or reconstruct” (p. 62).

Cameron critiques the “plain style” promoted by *The Times’* style guide on the basis of its uniformity, transparency, and value-free neutrality, as a suspect product of such sedimentation. She mounts a series of arguments that aim to undermine these values as they were adopted by the champion of a morally superior style (one that could actually convey the “truth”) — George Orwell. She contends that, when real speakers process such Orwellian abuses of language as euphemisms and double-

speak, contrary to his claims of totalitarianism and a breakdown in communication, if they cannot effectively make a meaning, they will infer one — and it will be close enough.

In another chapter, Cameron examines the grammar debate engendered by The Education Reform Act of 1988 in England and Wales, perhaps the most obvious example of how the discourse of verbal hygiene barely disguises an ideological battleground. In her analysis the conservatives represent the forces of prescription and law and order, calling for a back-to-basics approach to grammar; and the leftists, the forces of pluralism, calling for a tolerance and fostering of bilingualism and dialect diversity. In Cameron's narrative of this debate, she ascribes race and class paranoia to the conservatives, and depicts "permissive" teachers and linguists as the scapegoats who, along with the leftists, lose the battle in the end. With a number of examples, she illustrates "the slippage between linguistic and moral terms" that is characteristic of such debates — the conflation of "correct" with "character," "grammar" with "honesty," and "a lack of standards" with "crime." Linguists, she says, lost the debate in the court of public opinion because they denied the importance of standards.

In her examination of political correctness, she uses as her case study the manual developed by her own university for "gender-free language." The authors of this guide persuaded their users to voluntarily adopt their recommendations by appealing to common sense values most users already had: civility (or sensitivity — to include women so as not to offend them), accuracy (language should reflect the reality that both men and women exist), and fairness (as parallel treatment for both sexes). However, Cameron argues that these values are not reliably rational and may not always be sufficiently convincing for users: detractors of the manual argued that the guidelines could be unfair to men, less than accurate (by removing feminine inflections such as "ess" from words denoting women), and over-sensitive in the eyes of some.

As elsewhere, she is above all arguing for a more rational approach because some issues of language use do indicate a genuine need for change. Although change involves both resistance and compliance, and it takes time, "the fact that verbal hygiene is not wholly efficacious does not mean it is completely pointless" (p. 147). She concludes that debates about political correctness are important because they are really about how to accommodate diversity yet preserve a common culture. A rational approach to such debates would shift the focus from whether we ought to have norms to the real issues of which norms are most desirable.

In a marked departure from this framework of diversity and standardization, Cameron's chapter on verbal hygiene for women speaks more to issues of feminism than debates about verbal hygiene, and it is perhaps the one place in her book that her personal politics tend to eclipse her overall purpose. In this chapter, she depicts

today's Eliza (of *Pygmalion* fame) in terms of a remodelling of her entire linguistic persona. Devices such as videos, training courses, seminars, and workshops — often marketed as management, interpersonal, or leadership skills training — constitute the practices of this brand of verbal hygiene. She is particularly critical, as many other commentators are now, of Deborah Tannen's popular book on male-female communication, *You Just Don't Understand* (1990). Besides challenging Tannen's research (mostly anecdotal), she expresses concern that its "descriptions" are usually interpreted as prescriptive advice on how to use appropriate feminine speech — a stance of normativity that she says betrays an underlying paternalism.

Her main object of critique, however, is the duality of verbal hygiene advice for women. On the one hand, there is relationship advice, exemplified by Tannen and others, that situates women in their domestic domain where the differences between men and women are to be approached as givens, and therefore as matters of tolerance and accommodation on the parts of women (since they are the intended readers of such advice, and men are not). On the other hand, there is career advice for women that situates women in the workplace and amounts to the general maxim of "talk like a man." Here, Cameron argues, a more rational approach would articulate what these verbal hygiene injunctions are meant to mask — the structural asymmetry of the world of work, still a man's domain, and the world of the home, a woman's domain — one a domain of power, the other of dependence.

Cameron thus charges Tannen's thesis of "difference" between the sexes as a sanitized representation of "inequality." The larger question, she says, is "speaking rights," again the question of who is the "master" of language use. She concedes that self-help advice literature serves an important psychological and social function in reassuring women of their normalcy through the sharing of common stories about women's experiences and men's inadequacies. But this discourse is a "thin culture" requiring no deep commitment from women, and offering only trivial transformations compared to more meaningful identities of true equality.

In her final chapter, Cameron repeats her belief that debates about verbal hygiene serve important functions and must therefore be treated seriously by language experts. These debates can entertain, explore contentious issues safely and imaginatively, create a sense of community, and provide an analog of social order. They are also important because, while they cannot control thoughts, they can control behaviour (she describes the hilarious and frightening verbal rituals that telemarketers are scripted to act out among themselves to keep them "pumped" in what must be an otherwise depressing environment). And, finally, because they ultimately rely on

irrational appeals to speakers' fears and desires, these debates must be reconceived rationally. The principles she offers for such an inquiry are logical outcomes of the arguments she has mounted throughout the book:

- Some value judgements on language use are legitimate and bear investigation, but not all such judgements are equally valid.
- Rules for language use should be based on reasons.
- Hidden agendas and vested interests should be made an explicit part of the debate.
- Only relevant facts should be considered.

She also urges linguists to address the charge of relativism that sees them as condoning an attitude towards language use that amounts to “anything goes.” They need to explain how they are using words like “appropriate” and “effective” that sound like “good” and “correct” to lay people, and they must acknowledge their own subjectivities. Such clarifications would contribute to the work of critical discourse analysis that aims to help identify hidden agendas and interests in language advice, and to distinguish between real and trivial or imaginary abuses of language.

There is much to recommend about this book, primarily Cameron's contribution to the debates by giving “verbal hygiene” a name. By conceptualizing the phenomenon as she has done, her work should enable further research into this subject. Her approach promises to bring a greater degree of rationality to the debates. The rigour of her research could contribute to this rational grounding.

If there is one important reality that Cameron's book establishes, it is the clear challenge to any verbal hygiene discourse that constructs a “stupid” person on the receiving end of messages and that grossly underestimates users of language:

Unlike the pragmatically-challenged dimwits who populate usage guides and sales manuals, real language-users automatically probe for the meaning beneath the surface. (p. 221)

This is a reality that zealous, well-intentioned guardians of the language routinely forget, and in doing so they idiotize and demean others — students, employees, peers, and generally ordinary folk.

Although Cameron's main audience seems to be linguists and other scholars of the humanities, *Verbal Hygiene* has direct relevance for anyone vested in the practices of verbal hygiene and language use. For those of us involved in aspects of the verbal

hygiene industry, reading *Verbal Hygiene* provides a renewed opportunity and context for self-reflection about our own practices, and about our influence on the debates themselves.