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TRANSPARENCY OF STYLE – AN IMPOSSIBLE GOAL ?

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Résumé : L'objet de cet article est de réfléchir au terme « style transparent ». Après quelques réflexions générales relatives à la notion de transparence, les procédés langagiers employés pour obtenir ce style sont analysés. On examine ensuite les limites d'une telle philosophie du style.

Mots-clés: transparence, style, opacité, idéologie, style minimaliste, manuel de style

Introduction

One of the judgments made frequently about style is that it should be - to use George Orwell's words - "transparent – like a window-pane" (1946). This preoccupation with using a transparent style is far from being exclusively limited to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, for it can be found in earlier writing such as Walt Whitman's "Preface to the Leaves of Grass" (1855, 13), when he compares an ornamental style to curtains that prevent the reader from directly accessing the writer's thoughts and experiences:

The greatest poet has less a marked style and is more the channel of thoughts and things without increase or diminution and is the free channel of himself. He swears to his art, I will not be meddlesome, I will not have in my writing any elegance or effect or originality to hang in the way between me and the rest like curtains. I will have nothing hang in the way not the richest curtains. What I tell I tell for precisely what it is. Let who may exalt or startle or fascinate or soothe I will have purposes as health or heat or snow has and be as regardless of observation. What I experience or portray shall go from my composition without a shred of my composition. You shall stand by my side and look in the mirror with me.

In fact, the belief that good writing entails using a clear, plain style can be traced as far back as the Greek classics and Aristotle's distrust of metaphoric language. The opposition between plain, transparent language and "veiled" language is also to be found in the Bible, where the evangelist writes "Though I have been speaking figuratively, a time is coming when I will no longer use this kind of language but will tell you plainly about my Father" (John 16:25). And Thomas Wilson writing in his *Art of Rhetoric* [1560] states that an orator must "utter his mind in plain words such as are usually received, and tell it orderly, without going about the bush" (31) if his listeners are to understand him completely.

Perhaps the clearest example of this deep-rooted preference for "plain talking" is to be found in our everyday idioms and proverbs. We all tell people at some point or other to "stop beating about the bush", to call "a spade a spade", while convoluted language is pejoratively referred to as gobbledygook, weasel terms and the like.

However as Cameron (1995) points out, the idea that style should be transparent is invariably linked to social and political movements, and used to advance other agendas. Tyndale's rendering of the New Testament into plain and literal English in 1525 cannot be separated from the Reformation. The Inkhorn Controversy¹ accompanied a debate about national identity (Cameron 1995, 64) and it has been argued (Stark 2009) that the Royal Society's support of a plain style in the seventeenth century was partly motivated by a desire to distance itself from the rhetoric of alchemy and the occult.

Following on from Ernest Gowers (1948), the movement for Plain English has concentrated in more recent times on eliminating obscure English from legal documents and official texts. This movement has been especially vocal in the United States where various Presidents, first Jimmy Carter in 1978 and later President Clinton in 1998, have advocated plain English in official texts, culminating in Obama's signing the Plain language Act in 2010. Clinton's memorandum entitled "Plain Language in Government Writing" states:

The Federal Government's writing must be plain language. By using plain language, we send a clear message about what the Government is doing, what it requires, and what services it offers. Plain language saves the Government and the private sector time, effort, and money.

Plain language, or a transparent style, has thus become linked to transparency within government and administrations, and is justified in terms

¹ The phrase "inkhorn terms" was used during the mid-sixteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries to refer to neologisms derived from Latin and Greek. A debate arose as to whether classical sources should be used to coin new words or whether it was preferable to use words of Anglo-Saxon origin instead.

of a cost-effective exercise. Similar economic arguments are to be found on The National Adult Literacy Agency website where the proponents of plain English claim “After producing a clearer bill in plain English, British Telecom saw customer inquiries fall by 25% each quarter”. The relationship that is created between a transparent style and transparent government practices simply underlines the fact that the choice of a transparent style is as ideologically motivated as any other choice, the paradox being that while this style purports to be “transparent”, it dissimulates as well as any other style. In the words of Kenneth Cmiel (1996, 260):

The plain style....creates the illusion that language can be like glass, a medium without the infusion of a self. It pretends the facts can speak for themselves in ways that the old rhetoric never did. The very style has helped perpetuate the belief that there are technical, apolitical solutions to political problems. It is perhaps the most deceptive style of them all.

So how is such a style to be recognized, and what are the specific features that set it apart from other modes of writing?

The Characteristics of a Transparent Style

In spite of the fact that the debate surrounding transparency of style has been ongoing for so many centuries, there is a surprising consistency regarding the characteristics associated with such a style. Whitman’s description of great poets that was quoted earlier pinpoints many of these features:

- A transparent style does not draw attention to itself. In other words figures of speech, any “ornaments” of style, are to be avoided.
- A transparent style is associated with honesty, with telling things straight. It does not intervene between the writer and his art. It is concise whereas excessive wordiness is equated with deception. This idea is echoed by Orwell ([1946] 2000, 357) when he writes:

The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish squirting out ink.

For the American comic George Carlin (2001, 197), long-winded euphemisms are used as a smokescreen to hide the brutal truth. He illustrates this by tracing the history of the terms used to describe the neurotic disorder suffered by soldiers during combat. The two-syllable term *shell shock* used in the First World War, was first replaced by *battle fatigue* in the Second World War (four-syllables), then by “operational exhaustion” in the Korean War (eight syllables) and finally by “post-traumatic stress disorder” during the war in Vietnam. Instead of “simple, honest, direct language”, we now find ourselves

with an expression where “the pain is completely buried under jargon” and “the humanity has been squeezed out of the phrase”.

Linking a transparent style with honesty introduces moral values into the equation, but this goes deeper than simply being concise. Drawing on Berel Lang’s essays *Writing and the Moral Self*, Deborah Cameron (1995, 68) points out that “in handbooks such as *The Elements of Style*, readers are shown how to construct an acceptable moral self by conforming to certain stylistic norms”.

1. A transparent style takes into consideration the reader

Recent usage guides have emphasized that it is essential to remember who the text is addressing. Cutts, for example, considers that writing lengthy sentences is “an unfriendly act” (1995, 41) and he advocates aiming texts at the “level of reading skill of the average person”, which, he points out, is the reading age of 13 (*ibid.*, 98). As a point of reference, tabloids such as *The Sun* and *Mirror* are written for the UK reading age of 14 (*ibid.*, 100). In fact, Cutts argues that in the digital age, it is hardly surprising that more recent style guides have also focused on the material text and the layout of the page. The writers of *A Plain English Handbook* from the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), point out that “in a plain English document, design serves the goal of communicating the information as clearly as possible” (1998, 37). This may mean simply breaking up the text into shorter paragraphs, or using bullet points.

The various characteristics examined so far demonstrate that a transparent style is often held up as an ideal, both moral and stylistic. For the budding writer who is unsure how such an ideal should be achieved, there are many style guides available outlining the linguistic structures that should or should not be used.

2. Plain English – a set of grammatical rules

The clearest list of do’s and don’ts is undoubtedly the one provided by Orwell ([1946] 2000, 359):

1. Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

In spite of Orwell's sixth tenet, these principles have become established rules in most style guides. The use of the active voice, for example, is encouraged in *The Federal Plain Language Guidelines* since it "makes clear who is supposed to do what" while the "passive voice obscures who is responsible for what and is one of the biggest problems with government documents".

Similarly, style guides advise avoiding nominalizations in favour of "clear, crisp, lively verbs" (Cutts 1995, xxvi), and some even go as far as to encourage writers of government documents to write entirely in the present tense as "The more you use conditional or future tense, the harder your audience has to work to understand your meaning" (Federal Plain Language Guidelines, 2011). The modal auxiliary *shall* also comes under attack, as it is "one of those officious and obsolete words that has encumbered legal style writing for many years. The message that *shall* sends to the audience is, 'this is deadly material'". The same authors argue that "besides being outdated, 'shall' is imprecise. It can indicate either an obligation or a prediction. Dropping 'shall' is a major step in making your document more user-friendly." Instead of *shall*, *must* is to be preferred, although the authors seem oblivious to the fact that *must* can also express epistemic and root modality.

Proponents of a transparent style and plain English, also offer advice on the kind of vocabulary that should be used. In *The King's English*, Fowler (1922, 1) offers the following principles for anyone "who wishes to become a good writer":

- Prefer the familiar word to the far-fetched.
- Prefer the concrete word to the abstraction.
- Prefer the single word to the circumlocution.
- Prefer the short word to the long.
- Prefer the Saxon word to the Romance word.

Many of the principles outlined above can be found in Cutts' rewriting of an official document into a transparent plain style:

I am in receipt of information from the citizens advice bureau, which I believe is acting on your behalf, with regard to matters appertaining to your benefit claim. Will you please furnish the bureau with particulars of your savings.

I have received information from the citizens advice bureau, which I believe is acting on your behalf, about your benefits claim. Will you please give the bureau details of your savings. (Cutts 1995, 16)

It can, of course, be argued that the present-day Plain English movement is primarily concerned with a specific kind of text: instruction manuals, legal documents, government forms and the like. But the earlier quotation from

Whitman, and Orwell's interest in transparent style, should alert us to the fact that literary writers entertain similar preoccupations. Nor should the important role played by style guides be underestimated. As Cameron points out (1995), before any book reaches the reader, it has been checked by proof readers and copy editors with Plain English Style Guides close to hand. So how far is such a style possible in literary works? Certain writers, such as Hemingway and Carver are held up as masters of plain style, yet is their style transparent?

3. *The Minimalist Style – a transparent style?*

Carver's explanation of how he continually cut his text would surely appeal to plain speech advocates who insist on reducing redundant text:

Originally the manuscript was about twice as long, but I kept paring it on subsequent revisions and then pared some more, until it achieved its present length and dimensions. (1991, 103)

Moreover, if we try to ascertain the readability of Carver's texts by using a readability calculator such as Word's Flesch Reading Ease and the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level², then we discover for two of his short stories, *Cathedral* and *Kindling*, the use of the passive voice corresponds to 1% of the text. *Cathedral* has a score of 8.8 words per sentence. *Kindling* just 5.4 and both have reading ease of over 90% which corresponds to a reading age of below 10. Obviously such test scores have their limits, but if we bear in mind that Cutts advocates writing for a reading age 13 and sentences of an average 15 words, then Carver is arguably plain English at its best. Moreover, most of the clauses are coordinated, most of the tenses used are simple tenses, there are few metaphors and Carver is not afraid of using repetition. The question that remains to be answered, however, is whether this does in fact make Carver's style any more transparent in terms of comprehensibility. At first sight, the following passage might seem to correspond to plain English:

He turned the knob, and the door opened quietly and the house was quiet.

There is little difficulty in understanding what is happening here, the simplest forms of the verbs are used, the clauses are coordinated, and a canonical word order is followed. However, within the context of the short story *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, these simple actions become pregnant with meaning and the repetition of *quiet* creates suspense. Although less is said,

² *Flesch Reading Ease* and *Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level* are two readability calculators provided by *Microsoft Word*. They measure readability by examining word length and sentence length. The underlying assumption is that a passage containing long words and long sentences will be less readable.

each action, presented as a main verb, is focused upon, so that it carries greater intensity and the reader's imagination is prompted to fill in the gaps.

Similarly, the use of what might be deemed "transparent vocabulary" does not necessarily result in greater clarity. Carver often uses superordinate terms such as the verbs *look* and *say*, which could easily be labelled as "transparent" and easily comprehensible. The verb *look* can occur in structures where the grammatical subject plays an active role, *he looked at her*, or in structures where the grammatical subject is inactive and the object of someone else's perception, *he looked tired*. What happens in a Carver short story, such as *Neighbors*, is that, contrary to the uses just outlined, *look* occurs where no visual contact is established and no indication is given of the character's understanding of what he has observed. When Bill borrows the clothes belonging to his neighbour's wife and tries them on, he observes himself in the mirror but there is no description of what he looks like. The reader knows Bill must look slightly odd as he tries on a skirt he can't zip up, but his act of perception does not become an act of comprehension or interpretation. Similarly, quoting clauses frequently contain simply the verb *say* so that there is no indication for the reader of how the words were said. The fact that these verbs are repeated instead of using free direct speech draws the reader's attention to the words and encourages the reader once again to fill in the gaps.

In fact, many of the rules that are laid down in style guides do not necessarily make a text clearer or result in a transparent style. This becomes obvious if we examine how copy editors and/or proof readers modify texts under the influence of such guides. Writing in 1995, Cameron suggests that copy editors may well become obsolete with the advance of modern technology and authors using spell checks themselves (41). However, a comparison between two editions of a novel, the first published in the United Kingdom, the second in the United States, draws attention to the fact that copy editors still exercise a powerful control over the text. The substitution of the active voice for the passive in the following text is a case in point:

The Oskar Schindler who dismounted from his horse these days in the factory yard of Emalia was still a boomtime business man. He looked sleekly handsome in the style of the film stars George Sanders and Curt Jurgens, to both of whom **he would always be compared**. His hacking jacket and jodphurs were tailored, his riding boots had a high shine. He looked like a man to whom it was profit all the way. (Keneally 1982, 233)

The Oskar Schindler who dismounted from his horse these days in the factory yard of Emalia was still the prototypical tycoon. He looked sleekly handsome in the style of the film stars George Sanders and Curt Jurgens, to both of whom **people would always compare him**. His hacking jacket and jodphurs were tailored; his riding boots had a high shine. He looked like a man to whom it was profit all the way. (Keneally 2000, 244)

The American edition has preferred to remove the passive, but it is arguable as to whether the text is any more “transparent”. Indeed, the use of the passive in the British edition is in many ways more satisfactory as it maintains textual cohesion: the whole paragraph is centred on Oskar Schindler, and the subject of the active *people* is sufficiently indeterminate to warrant omission. To be fair to advocates of plain English, such as Martin Cutts, they do acknowledge that a passive can be useful. But obviously the danger lies in the fact that a proof-reader, less aware of linguistic subtleties, may simply apply, without further reflection, what they perceive to be a rule for transparency of style. Garner for example, argues that the passive

usually adds a couple of unnecessary words. Second, when it doesn’t add those extra words, it fails to say squarely who has done what. [...] Third, the passive subverts the normal word order for an English sentence, making it harder for readers to process the information. (2003, 592-3)

The notion that a transparent style must be concise also poses problems. Many of the structures that Huddleston and Pullum label as “information packaging”, and that are used to focus on important information, are longer than canonical word order. Such structures are therefore frowned upon by style guides, yet their removal can change our perception of the text. One such structure is the existential clause, *there* + BE, which for Strunk and White, authors of *The Elements of Style*, is totally unnecessary (2000, 18). In similar fashion Adams and Tickle, authors of *The HarperCollins Concise Handbook for Writers*, correct the sentence “There were three police officers waiting to arrest Mr. Bowles” to “Three police officers were waiting to arrest Mr. Bowles”, explaining that *there* adds no meaning to the original sentence: “the revised version is clearly less wordy; it is also more direct and more forceful” (1994, 165-6). Such substitutions suppose that the only difference between the two structures is of an aesthetic nature. However, several linguists (Erades 1975; Quayle 1998) have drawn attention to the fact that existential *there* has a specific function. Not only does it provide spatiotemporal information, but the use of existential *there* affects the position of the subject in the sentence, placing it in a postverbal position and giving it end-focus. The structure also has an important discourse function - notably to introduce and maintain a new topic in oral discourse.

In the following example, the narrator uses existential *there* at the beginning of a paragraph to introduce the noun phrase *a signal difference*, the new topic which is subsequently focused upon. The rest of the paragraph proceeds to describe why the map in question was so different from all previous projects.

The map is in many ways a classic representation of the ambitions of its day [...] But **there is** a signal difference that sets the map apart. (Winchester 2000a, 3)

In the American English (AmE) edition the copyeditor has corrected this to:

But **a signal difference sets** the map apart. (Winchester 2000b, xviii)

This modification may be less “wordy” but it has removed the discursive presence of the narrator seeking to indicate to the reader that what is to follow is of paramount importance.

Cleft sentences are another means available to give “thematic and focal prominence to a particular element of the clause” (Quirk *et al* 1972: 951) but these are obviously wordier than their canonical counterpart. In the following example, the British text has highlighted *this pearlhandled semi-toy*, while the AmE edition has opted to use a prepositional phrase:

It was with this pearlhandled semi-toy, that Pfefferberg would come close to killing Herr Schindler. (Keneally 1982, 57)

With this pearl-handled semitoys, Pfefferberg came close to killing Herr Schindler. (Keneally 2000, 51)

To understand the role of the cleft sentence here, it needs to be placed in its complete context. The preceding paragraph describes the weapon in question as being “an elegant .22 pistol”, and the cleft sentence opens a new paragraph the subject of which is contained in the second half of the cleft sentence: Pfefferburg’s near murder of Schindler. In other words, the information introduced by *that* is not “given” or presupposed information as is often the case with a cleft sentence. It is, in fact, the new subject of discourse. The cleft sentence thus acts as a link between what precedes and what follows, a bridge between the two paragraphs, providing a smooth transition from one topic to the next. The AmE text has chosen to prepose *with this pearl-handled semitoys* and thereby gives the pistol focal prominence. Such focal prominence is also a common use of the cleft sentence. However, in this specific context, the cleft sentence is not used for that purpose. The result is that in the AmE edition the paragraph begins by focusing on an element that is not the new topic of the paragraph that follows. The change in syntax makes the organisation of information inconsistent, less cohesive and ultimately less clear.

The next example also reveals the AmE copy-editor’s preference for a more basic syntactic structure. In this instance, the cleft sentence does provide contrastive focus:

‘It’s the gardens I look after.’ (Daniels³, 51)
“I look after the gardens.” (Baglio, 48)

Within the context of the story, the speaker is explaining that he cannot possibly look after both the gardens and a pony, and the cleft sentence implies *it’s the gardens I look after, not the pony*. The only way the sentence in the AmE edition could be given the same meaning would be if contrastive stress was placed on *gardens*. Without the reader supplying the emphasis, the character’s words seem strange.

One of the dangers then of style guides that advocate transparent English is that a direct connection is made between a linguistic structure and a specific effect, irrespective of its context of use. However, other assumptions underlying this belief in a transparent style are equally flawed.

The argument for conciseness, that “less” is preferable, implies that there are degrees of style, that it can therefore be measured. The Whitman quotation is illuminating in this respect – if we follow through the “style is curtains” metaphor then style is something that is added, that can be reduced (you can go from light net curtains to heavy drapes) if not completely removed. And we find ourselves faced with the age-old debate about style and content. Underlying the argument that style may hinder comprehension is the idea that style is something that is added to a text and if it is added then it can also be removed.

This leads on to the second assumption that there are two kinds of style. If there is a clear style then that implies there is an opaque one. But how do we decide when we are dealing with one rather than the other? To talk of a transparent style is to suggest that it is a fixed entity when in fact the clarity is created by the context. When health authorities advocate rewriting health warnings to make them more “transparent” it is within a certain context: they have in mind an average person, the man or woman in the street who is not a connoisseur of medical terms. But for a fully qualified doctor such simplification might lead to the text being less clear because it would be too imprecise.

By regarding plain English, or a transparent style, as a fixed entity, removed from context, the sociohistorical factors that create it are neglected. As pointed out earlier, nothing could be further from the truth. Movements for transparency of style or plain English are always products of their time, influenced by socioeconomic factors, a movement against corporate businesses, or a desire to purify the language from the influence of “foreign” terms. Critical Discourse Analysts have spent much time analyzing politicians’ lack of

³ The AmE edition has also changed the name of the author from Lucy Daniels to Ben Baglio.

transparency and the underlying ideology, but perhaps we need too to ask what other issues are at stake in advocating a transparent style.

Moreover, style –whether transparent or not– inevitably contains the same stylistic traits that plain English proponents would have us remove. Pullum (2009) was quick to point out that Strunk and White in their attack on the passive nevertheless used it themselves. Similarly, Cutts (1995), however much he may warn would-be writers to avoid metaphors, is not averse to using the odd one himself, which if taken literally strike the reader as odd. The following examples illustrate his use of figurative language while he paradoxically advocates Plain English:

cutting dross enables your information to shine more clearly. (41)

This book is about how to avoid writing French when you intend to write English.
(ix)

In most well-written sentences, nouns tend to lie next to each other. Normally starved of familiar company, when they are eventually bundled together by an unthinking author, they often couple promiscuously and spawn that loathsome love child of business writing, the noun string. (64)

Whenever authors find themselves wading in treacle like this, they need to stop and drain some of it away. (46)

What these examples demonstrate is not that style is more or less transparent but that to aim for a totally plain style is bound to fail. If “grammar leaks” so too does the plain unadorned style: not only does it not exist but the very nature of language and the way we use language works against it.

Finally, underlying the notion of a transparent style is surely the philosophy that, all we need do is choose the correct words and structures that correspond to our thoughts and then for our addressee to decode these words and structures in order to communicate effectively. In other words, proponents of transparent style consider language as a code, with meaning being communicated according to the conduit metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 231) or what Harris (1996) calls telementation. But as Lecercle (1990), Harris (*op.cit.*) and many others have demonstrated, Jakobson’s model of communication, whereby an addresser sends the addressee a message that is simply decoded, is far from being exact. The addresser is never in total control of his message for there is no guarantee that the addressee will interpret the structure in a specific way and language inevitably interacts with context. In the words of Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 206):

On this account it is possible to objectively say what you mean, and communication failures are matters of subjective errors: since the meanings are objectively right there in

the words, either you didn't use the right words to say what you meant or you were misunderstood.

The underlying problem with Plain English and transparency of style is that it places the emphasis fairly and squarely on the message. As McGann points out: "a 'literary' work, in its textual condition, is not meant for transparency, is not designed to carry messages. Messages may be taken from such work, but always and only by acts of simplification and diminishment" (McGann 1991, 76).

So is the concept of transparent style to be totally rejected? Perhaps, rather than take the word transparent to mean "simplified" or "clear", we should consider style and content to be two inseparable sides of the same coin, so that the language used by a writer inevitably reflects the way s/he wishes to depict the world or his or her "mind-style". The term "mind-style" was coined by Roger Fowler to refer to "any distinctive linguistic representation of an individual mental self" (Fowler 1977, 103). Thus Henry James's use of syntactic embedding is not to be seen as "ornamental" but as a linguistic feature that contributes to his creation of a fictional world bound up in intricate social codes (Leech and Short 1981). Carver's minimalism is not to be seen as an attempt to make his texts more "readable" but as a reflection of the isolation and alienation of his characters and their inability to communicate (Pillière 1999). If we follow this line of reasoning then a transparent style is one which allows the author's mind style to shine through, revealing how s/he perceives the world.

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