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PLEASE CITE THE PUBLISHED VERSION

http://www.palgrave.com/page/detail/The-Future-of-Scholarly-Writing/?sf1=barcode&st1=9781137520463

PUBLISHER

Palgrave Macmillan

VERSION

AM (Accepted Manuscript)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

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REPOSITORY RECORD

Billig, Michael. 2019. “Big Words in Small Circles: Bad Writing in the Social Sciences”. figshare. https://hdl.handle.net/2134/17334.

Big Words in Small Circles: Bad Writing and the Social Sciences

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It is easy to be irritated by the way that social scientists tend to write. One only has to read the specialist journals to find page after page of clumpy writing, stocked with the sort of technical terminology that seems designed to baffle outsiders. It is not only big theory that is incomprehensible, but empirical articles can be equally hard-going. No matter whether authors are using statistically based quantitative methodologies or conducting qualitative research, the results are likely to be expressed in perplexing prose, using what the great sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, quoting Pascal, called 'puffed-up words'[1]. It is hardly surprising, then, that every so often an insider's patience will snap; recently it was my turn to cry out in protest. My book Learn to Write Badly: how to succeed in the social sciences belongs to a line of works, where social scientists question whether their disciplines have become mired in muddy jargon[2].

Over forty years ago, Stanislav Andreski, a professor of sociology at Reading University in the United Kingdom, published an ill-tempered book entitled Social Science as Sorcery[3]. Andreski quoted long passages from notable sociologists, which he then 'translated' into simple English. He was demonstrating how the great and the good were using long words and pompous turns of phrases to hide the banality of their thinking. For good measure, Andreski accused fellow sociologists of lacking talent, even using words like 'cretinisation' to make

his point. His embittered book may have been fun to read but it did not exactly make him many friends. Nor did it change the way that his colleagues wrote.

Today, academic life is much harsher and more competitive than it was in Andreski's day. The pressures to publish are far more intense than they ever were. Not only are many more academics now publishing than they did a generation ago, but they are publishing more and at a faster rate than ever before[4]. With the demand to produce publications, we lack the time to craft elegant phrases, and, even more seriously, we lack the time to think. Instead we must keep ourselves chained to our keyboards, fingers tapping out the words. We find ourselves addressing narrow fields of experts. Only those within our sub-sub-disciplinary specialities will be familiar with the technical jargon that we must use as a matter of habit if we are to publish in the specialist journals. The result is that increasingly big words are circulating within decreasingly smaller circles.

Like Andreski forty years ago, it would be tempting to react by searching for the worst examples of pretentious, wordy writing and then to enjoy becoming righteously angry. However, that temptation should be resisted. Insults are no substitute for analysis. Our colleagues in the social sciences have not been blighted by a viral 'cretinisation' but they are trying to cope with demanding circumstances, as university life comes under the ever tighter control of managers, who impose commercial ambitions on their institutions. In these times, sneering or scapegoating is insufficient. And one should beware of slipping into reactionary tones – as if the problem were ill-educated sociologists or foreign philosophies. Instead, we need to marshal our smaller words in order to find out what is going wrong with our bigger ones.

To that end, a bit of linguistics can take us further than self-righteous anger, especially if it enables us to analyse what constitutes bad writing in the social sciences. For a social scientist,

'bad writing' does not necessarily mean ugly prose. After all, there is no reason why social scientists should make aesthetics a priority. For example, applied researchers, who might be recording public attitudes towards government agencies or who are exploring trends in media programming, will look a bit silly if they try to deck out their findings with graceful embellishments and rhetorical flourishes. On the other hand, there is every reason why they should write as clearly and precisely as possible.

In the social sciences bad writing is, above all, unclear writing where vague jargon is paraded as if it were the epitome of precision. As I argued in Learn to Write Badly, there are linguistic reasons why the sorts of technical terminology that social scientists habitually use and that journal editors seem to demand, may be less precise than ordinary language. And basically this comes down to the high ratio of nouns to verbs.

To understand why this might be so, we need to distinguish between the role of technical jargon in the natural and social science. It is easy to see why natural scientists need to be continually inventing new terms: ordinary language generally lacks the vocabulary for the sorts of entities that they wish to write about. Whether it be particular microbes, chemical compounds or minute parts of insect wings, natural scientists need to communicate with each other about things that ordinary people do not talk about. With most social scientists, things are somewhat different. By and large, the social sciences comprise topics that belong to ordinary people's lives and, thus, to their talk – whether it be racial prejudice, trends towards religious extremism or the extent to which the nations of the world are becoming increasingly interconnected. Ordinary people can and do talk about such matters without inventing new terminology. And they sometimes show equal, if not more, insight than the academic experts – and that is virtually impossible in most natural sciences.

Even so, social scientists might justify creating a range of new words, if they could show that ordinary words are hopelessly imprecise and unfit for the sort of analytic work that academics demand. This is where linguistics comes in. And it does not favour the defenders of long words in the social sciences.

The distinguished linguist Michael Halliday has argued that the great scientists of the early modern period were not just scientific innovators; they also needed to be linguistic innovators[5]. These scientists did more than invent new words for their newly discovered entities for they also needed to invent what amounted to virtually a new type of word. Previously, speakers and writers had tended to use nouns to describe objects (including animate entities such as persons, as well an inanimate things) and they used verbal clauses to describe processes occurring over time, including human actions or natural physical occurrences. For instance, in the sentence 'Noah built an ark' the grammatical subject (Noah) and the grammatical object (an ark) are both nouns which stand for objects (Noah and his ark). When the speaker/writer of ancient Hebrew wanted to describe an event linking these two objects, then the speaker/writer has to insert the names of the two objects into a clause containing a verb ('Noah built an ark'). The verb is necessary for describing the process or event which takes place over time. Speakers/writers of ancient Hebrew had neither the grammar nor vocabulary to describe this event in a verb-free noun phrase, like a modern writer can. They could not, or to be more precise, they would not refer to 'Noah's contra-flooding ark construction project', a noun phrase which itself can be used as the subject or object of a verbal clause: 'Noah's contra-flooding ark construction project demonstrated his great faith in the Deity's words'.

If modern English, like most other modern languages, contains many words for describing processes then, according to Michael Halliday, the big change started with the great scientists

of the early modern period in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Figures like Isaac Newton and later Joseph Priestley not only coined new nouns for new things, but they also devised nouns for physical processes, which occurred over time. As well as writing about things such as crystals, oxides and particles, they used nouns to describe how these things were formed or moved: crystallization, oxidization, particle repulsion etc. By regularly creating nouns for these physical events, they were grammatically treating processes as if they were things and thereby they were transforming the old patterns of language.

For natural scientists there were a number of benefits in doing this. Most obviously, the scientists used their new terminology to construct theories about processes. They could put processes as the grammatical subjects and objects of sentences and thereby write about the ways that one process might affect another. This saved them the bother of having all the time to engage in the cumbersome and repetitive business of linking clausal sentences, describing these individual processes, within larger clausal sentences describing how processes related to each other. Also scientists could avoid the danger of seeming to endow physical entities with the human-like or god-like qualities of agency, emotion and intention. For instance, if they wrote about particles attracting or repulsing each other, they would run the risk of being understood as implying that particles behaved like human lovers. It was safer to keep within the world of things by turning processes into physical entities and writing of ‘particle attraction’ and ‘particle repulsion’.

Over time, the language of the natural sciences became heavy with nouns and scientific writing today contains a higher ratio of nouns, and also of passive verbs, than most other genres of writing. This trend has not been confined to writing in the natural sciences. In a development that the linguist Douglas Biber has described as one of the most important in modern English, scientists have combined nouns into all-noun phrases, dispensing with

intervening prepositions - such as ‘particle attraction’, ‘rock formation’ or ‘amino-acid trigger mechanism’[6]. And, as Biber, has noted, it is not just scientists who use all-noun phrases today, but the characteristic has spread more generally, especially to formal English. It is certainly to be found in the social sciences, where writers have taken up many of the linguistic characteristics of the natural sciences. For example, we can read social scientists using all-noun phrases such as such as ‘Leadership Categorization Theory’ or ‘Transition Relevance Place’, typically reducing them to acronyms (LCT or TRP), which can only be recognized by insiders. Similarly, our university managers, following the linguistic practices of commercial managers more generally, have introduced boastful all-noun phrases, such as ‘Research Excellence Framework’, which they simplify and solidify into acronyms (REF).

If social scientists have in the past fifty years devised a whole range of technical words, then the overwhelming majority of these terms are nouns and noun phrases, and not verbs. This grammatical imbalance has had an effect on the way that social scientists write about the social world. For example, social scientists are much more likely to write about the ‘thing’ reification than describe the act of people reifying; social psychologists will write about social categorization, social representations and social attributions rather than people socially categorizing, representing or attributing. It the ‘things’, rather than acts, which social scientists seem to wish to capture in their theories.

Often all-noun phrases can be reasonably clear: ‘object perception’ refers to the perception of objects while ‘infant perception’ refers to perception by infants. No one is likely to confuse those terms. However, the absence of prepositions can sometimes lead to a lack of clarity. For instance, does ‘group categorization’ refer to the categorization by groups or to the categorization of groups or to both? Social scientists who use the term are not generally fussy about how the term is used[7].

Nevertheless the real lack of clarity does not derive from the lack of prepositions in all-noun phrases but from the nouns that are used. If the two linguistic features that mark academic writing are the high ratio of nouns and verbs in the passive voice, then when it comes to describing human actions both of these characteristics contain less information than simple active-voice clauses. Critical discourse analysts have said that ideologists, who wish to avoid identifying who committed an action and how/when they committed it, will prefer to describe the action either in the passive voice or by a noun[8]. As Roger Fowler showed, after police attacked defenceless protestors, the right-wing press, which supported the police, tended to headline their stories with passives 'Protestors attacked'; or they might reduce the event to a noun phrase 'Attack on protestors'. Both linguistic forms contain less information than 'Police attacked protestors' because they do not specify who did the attacking[9]. If a writer/speaker uses an active verb to describe an action, then they must give a grammatical subject to the verb; in other words, they must identify the agent of the action. Surprisingly social scientists, by using passives and nouns for human actions, are adopting linguistic habits that convey less information than active verbs, when it comes to describing actions. They are therefore using linguistic forms that are better suited for natural scientists describing the physical world than for social analysts describing what humans do.

Linguists have a technical term to describe the turning of verbs into nouns – 'nominalization'. Curiously this is just the sort of big, technical word for which social scientists have a fondness but which is much less precise than it promises to be. Linguists tend to define 'nominalization' as a process but from the ways that thy use this word it is unclear what sort of process (or type of action) it refers to. Sometimes, linguists use the term to refer to a historical process by which speakers/writers form new words; sometimes it is a process within a particular text as a writer moves from using a verb clause to a noun; sometimes it is a mental process by which a speaker mentally transforms s sentence into a noun; and

sometimes it is an ideal grammatical process – a property possessed by language itself and this turns out not to be a process at all. And to complicate matters even further, sometimes linguists use 'nominalization' not to refer to a process but to the nouns that have been formed by the so-called process of nominalization[10].

One would expect that this mix of different, even contradictory, meanings would breed confusion. The surprising thing is that it does not. Linguists do not seem bothered by the varying ways that they use the same concept: there has been no concerted call for uniformity. But perhaps that is the attraction of 'nominalization' and other similar words. Such big words allow analysts to appear, in their own eyes and in those of others, to be precise and technical, as if they have discovered this thing, which they have labelled 'nominalization'. In point of fact, the word allows them to avoid asking difficult questions. If we used the verb 'nominalize', instead of the noun 'nominalization', we would have to consider how people might actual perform the act of nominalizing – what exactly do speakers/writers have to do in order to turn nouns into verbs and whether there might be various, very different ways of 'nominalizing'? We can skirt around such potentially awkward questions by using the seemingly precise, technical big noun. It seems to present things as if everything had been clarified, and the messiness of human actions had been transformed into a solid entity.

Linguists are by no means unique in using nouns to transform human actions into theoretical things. We can encounter the analogous use of big nouns throughout the social sciences, as social scientists seek to discover theoretical 'things', rather than to describe in detail what people actually do. The result is that much social scientific writing is curiously unpopulated. Thus, some social scientists will write about entities such as globalization affecting other entities like mediatisation, re-ethnification and hybridization and so on. As they spin out the big words, they depict a curiously bloodless, depopulated world, almost as if they were

natural scientists trying to avoid the danger of treating the physical world as if it were peopled by spirits, ghosts and humans.

Many social scientists may claim to be radical critics of existing social arrangements, but their style of writing leads to new forms of conservatism that certainly does not trouble the university managers who encourage us to keep writing and keep publishing. A world of interacting 'ifications' and 'izations' is not a world in which groups of people are identified as owning resources and who by their actions control other people's lives. Instead, with the big nouns ready at hand, it becomes easy to depict a world of interacting fictional things rather than of real people.

By giving pride of place to their nouns, social scientists are unwittingly turning the world of people, who can be identified and held to account, into a world comprised of big, impersonal things which appear be unmoveable and unchangeable. As George Orwell realised many years ago, bad writing is a political matter more than an aesthetic one[11]. Sloppy writing means sloppy thinking. After all, it is much harder for us to write clearly with simple words: we must think clearly if we are to write clearly and readers can see more easily when our thinking is breaking down. It is much easier and speedier to let the big words tumble out thoughtlessly one after another to fill the pages of our publications.

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