Michael Wade Winter Lunch Talk 12th October 2022

In his book 'Jamestown: The Voyage of English', Lord Watson, Honorary President of The English Speaking Union, wrote: 'The American Indians adopted and adapted the English Language, and in the centuries that followed many millions across the whole world did the same. The English also absorbed a wide variety of foreign words into their own speech. This sponge-like character of the language led to it becoming the global lingua franca. The ideas and concepts that would come to shape the modern world, the notions of representative government, the rule of law and capitalism were expressed in English.'

When I was nine my French teacher came into the classroom one day carrying a gramophone. Without saying a word he put a 78 rpm record on the turntable and I heard the immortal words: 'Leçon Un, Premier Leçon. Jean est mon fils, Jeanne est ma fille.' It was an early Linguaphone course and it sparked in me a lifelong fascination with French and later with other European languages. Like many of us, however, I think I had taken my own language for granted. Then, when I was fourteen, my English teacher, the great Sam Burton, also silently arrived in the classroom one day carrying a gramophone, but this time the words I heard were, 'Let us go then you and I...' It was TS Eliot himself reciting his astounding Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock, and in the ensuing few minutes I was entranced. I couldn't have known then that what I was hearing was the very essence of what George Eliot meant when she said that the finest language is mostly made up of simple unimposing words, or what Harold Pinter meant when he talked about the art of taking away, of paring down speech so that what is left has a starker shape.

At school the study of Latin seemed pointless to me because I couldn't speak it to anyone, but I later realised that it and the endless points of English grammar my pitiless teachers rammed into my head gave me an excellent grounding in the intricacies and subtleties of language, without which I think I'd have found it more difficult to express myself accurately, especially when discussing really important or complicated subjects.

In Shakespeare's time there was considerable uniformity in what was taught across the Elizabethan grammar school system. Boys - and I'm sure I read somewhere that in some cases their sisters could accompany them. I hope that's true - would remain in the first form until they could read Latin aloud with correct pronunciation and clear expression. They would then proceed to the second form where they were introduced to grammar and set texts from Cato, which demonstrated the 'eloquence of the tongue'. In the third form they studied more demanding and literary texts such as Aesop's Fables, the poetry of Virgil, Cicero's letters and the comedies of Terence. Pupils who succeeded in mastering these would eventually be promoted to the fourth form where they translated daily from Latin to English and back again and tackled increasingly demanding reading, versification and composition of 'epistles'. In addition to all this they were taught how to argue both sides of

a question - invaluable training for lawyers and dramatists but, alas, not politicians it seems - and they were expected to speak Latin at all times, ***except when they were assisting in the instruction of the lower forms!*** Little wonder that they developed exceptional clarity of thought and expression, which were in turn intrinsic to the development of the aforementioned notions of representative government, the rule of law and capitalism. And little wonder that this system helped produce the greatest ever exponent of the English language.

So where did it all go wrong? What is happening to our extraordinary language? Where is the clarity? Why do I regularly want to kick in my television set and my radio which disgorge a constant barrage of dreadful grammar, syntax, tautology and incorrect words? What happened to Thomas Jefferson's priceless dictum that the most valuable of all talents is that of never using two words where one will do? The most visible, or rather audible, offenders are journalists, politicians and presenters with a public voice and a pen, most of whom are university educated.

I have jotted down and strung together some examples of these howlers, actual quotes, and I'm about to assault your ears with them. They are invading orthodox language so insidiously that, to my consternation, I sometimes catch a few coming out of my own mouth. I will try to stress the offending words in case you also hear them so frequently that they pass unnoticed.

Today will be a little bit ***more*** cooler and snow will fall ***from the sky***. Well thank you for clearing that up! So ***therefore that's why*** what we need is ***we need*** to think back two months ***ago***. The reason ***why*** is ***because back*** in January we still hadn't decided ***yet*** how to proceed despite previous attempts ***in the past,*** so the country, especially outside ***of*** London, ***are as of yet*** still ***a***waiting ***for*** us to find a solution. The problem is ***is*** that this is really, ***really*** an enormous, ***huge*** problem, and also it is ***definitively*** very important ***as well***, so let me be absolutely clear that perhaps ***it may be likely that potentially*** we ***may*** find a way if we are not ***reticent*** to accept the challenge. From whatever starting point we start ***from*** we may then ***subsequently*** find, as time and again we have seen ***very often***, that when we combine all these aspects ***together*** we haven't nipped this in the bud ***early***, ***likelier*** because the chief proponent of all this is ***sat*** there scratching ***their*** head and wasn't ***implicit*** in the decision making. Theethinks I doth ***pro***test too much? I could go on. . .

In a lighter vein, stressing or caressing one word or the other can alter the meaning of a phrase, often delightfully and to comic effect. A friend who works in the music and recording business was once asked what he did for a living. "I'm a sound operator," he said. Back came the reply at lightning speed, "Do you mean you're a sound operator or a **sound operator**?" Such is the joy of language. But a perfectly well-constructed sentence can have

its meaning distorted or even annihilated by crass misinflection. I heard a horrible example of this while watching a documentary about Hitler's Einsatzgruppen and their participation in mass murder in Eastern Europe. During the film the camera rests on a large field which the narrator tells us is a mass grave. Then he says, “About fifty thousand people were murdered here, but it’s impossible to know exactly how many ***died***.” Would anyone like to say that correctly?

Moving from the ridiculous to the sublime, and in praise of language, here is a speech from The Real Thing, a play by Tom Stoppard. It could not be more apposite. Henry, a writer, is explaining to his wife, who is holding the script of a play she has been offered a part in, why he thinks it is badly written. He picks up his cricket bat:

This thing here, which looks like a wooden club, is actually several pieces of particular wood cunningly put together in a certain way so that the whole thing is sprung, like a dance floor. It’s for hitting cricket balls with. If you get it right, the ball will travel two hundred yards in four seconds, and all you’ve done is give it a knock, like knocking the top off a bottle of stout, and it makes a noise like a trout taking a fly. What we’re trying to do is write cricket bats, so that when we throw up an idea and give it a little knock, it might…*travel*… Now that script is a like lump of wood of roughly the same shape trying to be a cricket bat, but if you hit a ball with it, it will travel about ten feet and you’ll drop the bat and dance about shouting ‘Ouch’ with your hands stuck into your armpits. ***This*** isn’t better because someone says it’s better, or because there’s a conspiracy by the MCC to keep cudgels out of Lords. It’s better because it’s better. Words don’t deserve ***that*** kind of malarkey. They’re innocent, neutral, precise, standing for this, meaning that, meaning the other, so if you look after them you can ***build bridges across incomprehension and chaos***. But when they get their corners knocked off they’re no good any more. I don’t think writers are sacred, but words are. They deserve respect. If you get the right ones in the right order, you can ***nudge the world a little***.

Regrettably, there is a flip side to that, and to what Lord Watson wrote about the practical effects of an evolving English on political evolution. In the essay 'Politics and the English Language', George Orwell wrote: 'All issues are political issues. When the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer... It is clear that the decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes.' Umberto Eco said in 1995 that all forms of fascism speak Newspeak, Orwell’s term for the official language of Ingsoc, or English Socialism. And the Nazi or fascist schoolbooks made use of an impoverished vocabulary and an elementary syntax in order to limit the instruments for complex and critical reasoning. But here’s Orwell again, this time more sanguine: Modern English is full of bad habits which spread by imitation. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step towards political regeneration.' I think Orwell is saying one can nudge the world. Or... one can ‘Build Back Better!’

Lastly, to literature as art. There is a paragraph in James Joyce's 'A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man' which shot off the page at me the first time I read it. Stephen Dedalus and some of his fellow students are walking along a Dublin street discussing aesthetics. Dedalus says: 'To speak of these things and to try to understand their nature and, having understood it, to try slowly and humbly and constantly to express, to press out again from the gross earth or what it brings forth, from sound and shape and colour which are the prison gates of our soul, an image of the beauty we have come to understand - that is art.'

Apart from being a matchless definition of art, that is also great language, great literature, great art. Like that cricket ball, it soars, and it nudges the world. Which brings me back, full circle, to Sam Burton and his gramophone. It is no exaggeration to say that that day was the first day of the rest of my life. For some it may be a mathematical equation or something Einstein said, though such matters will forever remain way above *my* pay grade. But despite my state of near rapture I had understood practically nothing of what Eliot was saying - that came in stages much later and is still work in progress. Eliot rarely discussed the meaning of his poems; he thought that should lie between the poem and the reader. About 20 years after writing 'The Waste Land' he picked it up one day, having not looked at it or thought much about it for most of that time, and found meanings in it that had not occurred to him when he wrote it. That said, what began to unlock Prufrock for me was an excellent essay which described it as the dramatic interior monologue of an ageing, urban man who, stricken with feelings of isolation, inadequacy and thwarted desire, is incapable of decisive action. Its impact cannot be overstated. It is a highly innovative early example of literary modernism. By request, and also because for about forty years I have wanted to come to Blundell's and 'give it back', here it is. I hope I can do it justice.