

項莊：語言的過份發展

## The Overdevelopment of Language

By Xiang Zhuang

Translated by D. E. Pollard

I DO NOT KNOW if other people share my feeling that human language (which may include the written word) is now seriously overdeveloped, that is, developed beyond actual need, to the point that everybody prattles on at inordinate length, while all that truly needs to be said is only a few words.

The ancients already had a saying, "Flowers that seem to speak do more than their office; stones that are dumb show most consideration." Such a reactionary sentiment was clearly provoked by distress at the prevalence of excessive verbiage even of yore. In the present day 'the art of language' has further progressed: it is no longer a question simply of "flowers that seem to speak"!

There are some things that do not need to be stated explicitly, or even can dispense with words altogether: the expressions "a clever person only requires a hint" and "can be intuited but not explained" refer precisely to these delicate states.

To go into detail when there is no need to go into detail is not only a waste of talking and listening, it often leads to the ruination of the matter itself. Very proper sentiments that can only be intuited and yet are required to be put into words may at a stroke be made to appear vulgar and in bad taste: isn't this to be 'too clever by half'? For instance, when a man and woman delight in each other's company, for the word "love" to be always on their lips would be most unseemly. If love needs to be so confessed it is very doubtful if it can be called love. The same rule would apply in the main to all states of feeling.

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In terms of professions, diplomats are probably the greatest purveyors of verbiage, but they have received professional training and can make their prolixity quite absorbing: they give the impression of having everything worked out, whereas in fact it is a case of "embroidered pillow case but straw stuffing". The fact that professional diplomats are in our day not what they used to be has perhaps something to do with making too many speeches.

To distinguish between peoples (based on impressions gained from watching films from various countries), the Chinese are not the most given to verbiage: the stamina of the Japanese and Italians is the most intimidating.

To distinguish according to age, it would seem that verbiage increases the older one gets, possibly because of old people's fear of being alone.

To distinguish according to sex, the verbiage of females is unquestionably greater than that of males, the reason being that their innate mode of thought is deductive rather than inductive, resulting in failure to seize the main point.

To distinguish according to standard of education, strangely enough the more learned the person, the greater the verbiage. Learning inclines him to indulge in verbal artistry, with the unfortunate consequence that he trails behind the "hawker and pedlar" in his ability to put a point in a nutshell.

Finally, verbiage can be divided into two kinds. The first is deliberate, as in making speeches in public: out of a hundred sentences maybe only three have any substance, but one is forced to use ninety-seven as padding. The second is unconscious: by force of habit the discourse has to go back to begin with the Creation, and then is beset by diversions and digressions along its course, leading the speaker further and further away from the point until invariably there is no way of getting back to it, and it finally grinds to a halt, leaving him and his listeners staring at each other blankly.