

Words and sorcery

Simon Oxenham and Jon Sutton consider the causes and consequences of bad writing in psychology

Back in 1971 Stanislav Andreski's *Social Sciences as Sorcery* slammed academics for their inability to write clearly. There was, he argued, an 'abundance of pompous bluff and paucity of new ideas', a use of 'obfuscating jargon' to conceal a lack of anything to say. This was, Andreski argued, another reflection of modern society's 'advanced stage of cretinization'.

Fast forward to 2013 and social psychologist Michael Billig's superb *Learn to Write Badly: How to Succeed in the Social Sciences*. Billig, while clearly a fan of Andreski's 'gloriously ill-tempered stuff', would recoil at his use of 'cretinization'. 'Here, then, is the centre of my argument', Billig writes. 'The big concepts which many social scientists are using – the ifications and the izations – are poorly equipped for describing what people do. By rolling out the big nouns, social scientists can avoid describing people and their actions. They can write in highly unpopulated ways, creating fictional worlds in which their theoretical things, rather than actual people, appear as major actors.'

None of us want to live in that fictional world: a land of bluff and sorcery, of ivory towers, where maps of misunderstanding leave vast wastelands marked only 'Here be dragons'. Or do we?

Beyond jargon

How many conference presentations have sailed right over your head? How often

have you started to read an article or chapter – yes, in this publication as much as in more specialist journals and books – before becoming hopelessly lost in a thicket of writing that is stuffed full of big nouns and noun phrases, all 'ontologies' and 'epistemologies'? Might you own up to similar failings in your own written work?

OK, let's be generous: all walks of life have their specialist language. As Professor Roy Baumeister (Florida State University) tells us, '[J]argon has a positive function. Psychologists work with concepts that are often somewhat familiar to everybody – but the everyday terms are used in fuzzy and sloppy ways and carry lots of connotational baggage. Jargon is used because it is precise. New terms can be defined carefully, so that writers and informed readers share an exact understanding of what is meant.' And it does at least seem that scientists use less jargon in communication with a general audience than when talking with peers (although not always less obscure jargon: see Sharon and Baram-Tsabari, 2014).

Simply criticising jargon, therefore, misses the point: there's more to bad prose. We find it in an abstract style, with the individual invisible; it hides in shadowy extra syllables (step forward 'methodology' and 'utilise'); it's there in the academic terms chained together

without deeper knowledge... 'using an impressive concept, not to identify a discovery, but to cover over a lack of discovery' (Billig, 2013). In short, it is, as psychologist and author Steven Pinker says (2014b), 'prose that is turgid, soggy, wooden, bloated, clumsy, obscure, unpleasant to read, and impossible to understand'.

That's as much as we're going to say about what bad writing is... we're not here to give examples, to point the finger. (And yes, we're painfully aware of Muphry's Law – http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muphry's_Law – writing about writing is a risky business). In any case, you already know what bad writing looks like, and you know what it *feels* like: the shudder when you encounter it, the nagging sense of guilt when you resort to writing it. So this is not a style guide.

You will find little for the linguistic explorer; other pioneers, far braver than we are, chart that territory (e.g. Pinker, 2014a). Instead, we roam the fantasy land, considering why bad writing thrives. Why do so many psychologists write badly? What impact does it have? And can we chart a route out of the mire?

Bamboozling and boasting...

Are writers who can't write simply bad people, lacking in the right stuff? American philosopher Brand Blanshard wrote in 1954: 'Persistently obscure writers will usually be found to be defective human beings.' According to Blanshard, to fail to write as clearly as possible is simply 'bad manners'. Michael Billig feels that such a person is 'like a bully, who tries to humiliate others into submission'. And Pinker claims that the most popular explanation outside the academy for bad writing is 'the cynical one: Bad writing is a deliberate choice. Scholars in the softer fields spout obscure verbiage to hide the fact that they have nothing to say. They dress up the trivial

"Why do so many psychologists write badly? What impact does it have?"

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and obvious with the trappings of scientific sophistication, hoping to bamboozle their audiences with highfalutin gobbledygook.'

But are bad writers like an evil Wizard of Oz, conning their readers with elaborate tricks to make themselves seem great and powerful? Or are they simply 'following orders', delivering what they think is required by academia? Pinker acknowledges this explanation too, saying: 'People often tell me that academics have no choice but to write badly because the gatekeepers of journals and university presses insist on ponderous language as proof of one's seriousness.' The former *Guardian* science editor Tim Radford agrees, once telling this publication (see tinyurl.com/radford0503): 'I get the feeling scientists often get rewarded by journal editors for dressing up trivia in jargonistic language... [Papers] don't have to be written like that. On the 100th anniversary of Roentgen's discovery of X-rays it was quite weird seeing his paper and realising that anyone could understand it.'

But we would argue that the problem is bigger than journal publishing. Academia has changed. With increasing pressures on their time, academics produce hastily written works. There is an old saying 'easy writing makes hard reading', and founding father psychologist William James said that if there was anything good in his own style of writing, it was 'the result of ceaseless toil in rewriting'.

Billig also warns of a 'culture of competition and self-promotion' that is seeping into the content of our academic writings. 'This is a culture in which success and boasting seem to go hand in hand. When we write, we are constantly boasting about our approaches, our concepts, our theories, our ways of doing social sciences and what these products can achieve. It is boast after boast, but we scarcely notice that we are writing like academic advertisers and that we are training our students to do likewise.'

...Or blinkered?

Other explanations for bad writing are more forgiving. Roy Baumeister tells us: 'There are probably hundreds of thousands of social scientists worldwide, and many never really mastered the art of writing. Usually they are trying their best to write as they think the journals require. Their

best simply isn't that good'.

So what exactly is it that the bad writer lacks? The obvious answer would be education, but this is not the case. As Billig says, 'You have to study long and hard to write this badly. That is the problem.' What Billig hints at here is reflected in the Curse of Knowledge, which Pinker argues is central to the appallingly opaque standard of communication that makes up much of academic writing. The Curse of Knowledge has many guises: lack of a theory of mind, mind-blindness, ego-centralism, hindsight bias, false consensus, illusory transparency, to name a few. Pinker writes: 'It simply doesn't



Are bad writers conning their readers with elaborate tricks to make themselves seem great and powerful?

occur to the writer that her readers don't know what she knows – that they haven't mastered the missing steps that seem too obvious to mention, have no way to visualize a scene that to her is as clear as day. And she doesn't bother to explain the jargon, or spell out the logic, or supply the necessary detail.'

Pinker partially explains the Curse of Knowledge through the phenomenon of chunking. If the receiver doesn't possess the same 'chunks' of information that we are using to communicate, then we might as well be speaking gobbledygook. Pinker also borrows another concept from cognitive psychology, that of functional fixity. People typically fail to see that objects can have uses other than their intended function: given a candle, a book of matches and a box of thumbtacks and asked to attach the candle to the wall without it dripping on the floor, it might not occur to us to fix the box of thumbtacks to the wall in order to hold the candle. According to Pinker, academics face the same problem. 'Expertise can make our thoughts more idiosyncratic and thus harder to share:

as we become familiar with something, we think about it more in terms of the use we put it to and less in terms of what it looks like and what it is made of.' Pinker cites a paper in which researchers used true/false statements, but wrote: 'Participants read assertions whose veracity was either affirmed or denied by the subsequent presentation of an assessment word'. In Pinker's eyes the researchers fell into the trap of functional fixity, describing a word by its function, rather than in terms the reader can readily interpret.

The solution to the Curse of Knowledge seems straightforward, and is common to many forms of

communication: we must consider our audience. Go the extra mile, break down our chunks so that they match the repertoire of our audience; consider that our expertise may have caused us to lose sight of what the words actually mean to others. But even if we do begin to see through the readers' eyes, Pinker explains that fear can blind us: '[I]f our readers do know the lingo, we might be insulting their intelligence by spelling it out. We would rather run the risk of confusing them while at least appearing to be sophisticated than take a chance at laboring the obvious while striking them as naive or condescending.'

Could something even deeper be at play here? Might that 'appearance of sophistication' be rather alluring?

Does bad writing 'work'?

The fact that bad writing not only survives but thrives in a hostile world of grant applications and peer review might lead us to believe that writing using jargon and superficially sophisticated language can enhance the perceived quality of our work. In 2010 social and cognitive scientist Dan Sperber dubbed this phenomenon the 'guru effect': 'All too often, what readers do is judge profound what they have failed to grasp. Obscurity inspires awe' (see box, over, for more). Worse still, the opposite may be true if we fail to perform as expected, as Billig explains: '[I]f students and their teachers try to use simple, clear language, rather than big specialized concepts and phrases, then they will risk appearing as if they were inadequate, untrained and, most importantly, as if they did not belong.'

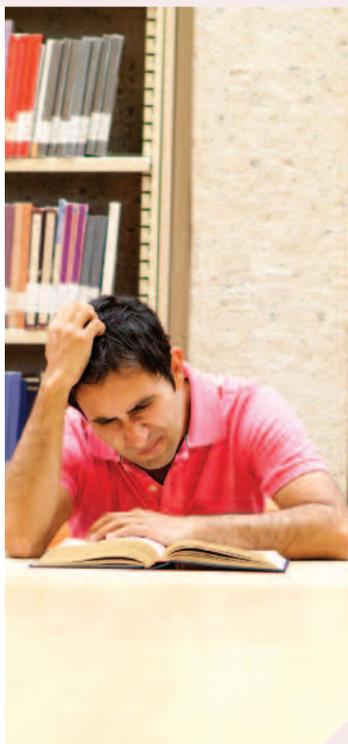
There is some evidence that this

The guru effect

'... participating in such a collective process [of interpretation] involves not just an intellectual but also – and more surely – a social benefit, that of belonging, of getting recognition as a person in the know, capable of appreciating the importance of a difficult great thinker. Not participating, on the other hand, may involve the cost of being marginalised and of appearing intellectually stale and flat.

'Here emerges a collective dynamics typical of intellectual schools and sects, where the obscurity of respected masters is not just a sign of the depth of their thinking, but a proof of their genius... Now sharing their interpretations and impressions with other admirers, readers find in the admiration, in the trust that other have for the master, reasons to consider their own interpretations as failing to do justice to the genius of the interpreted text. In turn these readers become disciples and proselytes. Where we had the slow back-and-forth of solitary reading between favourable interpretation and increased confidence in authority, now we have a competition among disciples for an interpretation that best displays the genius of the master, an interpretation that, for this purpose, may be just as obscure as the thought it is meant to interpret. Thus a thinker is made into a guru and her best disciples in gurus-apprentices.'

Dan Sperber (2010)



According to Billig: 'Size really does matter; and the intellectual circles, which specialist professors address in their writings, are becoming ever smaller.'

Another nasty side-effect of bad academic writing in psychology is the impact on the perception of the discipline among those outside of the field. Not too long ago the vast majority of academic research was locked up in an ivory tower, only seen by a relatively small community of career academics and psychologists. If a newspaper picked up a research story, researchers could expect journalists to be satisfied with a press release: the public weren't likely to trek down to a university library to request a copy. Today, an increasingly educated and connected public may expect research covered in the news to be accompanied by a link to the paper itself. And, as Eubanks and Schaeffer (2008) point out, bad writing can then be 'reprinted gleefully in the mainstream press as evidence that the

eggheads at our universities are not just loons but absolute bullshitters... Such writing is seen as gamesmanship in a game that is rigged. In the public mind, there is no admirable art or craft to bullshitting an audience of fellow academics who suspend disbelief so willingly.'

If the public are having the smell of bullshit wafted under their noses, it's no surprise that they don't like it. According to O'Connor and Joffe's (2014) study of social representations of brain research, drawing on interviews with 48 London residents, the public's disconnect with academia can boil over into resentment and withdrawal. 'Where do these people come from, that actually understand these things?', asked one respondent: not her world, was the implication. 'You just, like I say, blind people with science, don't you,' said another. 'And then it becomes a subject that you just don't understand. With me, I just switch off. I'm not understanding what you're talking about here, so I just switch off.'

Even scientifically trained journalists, paid to read your work, can react in that way: they're only human. As editor of the British Psychological Society's Research Digest, Dr Christian Jarrett has reported on the scientific literature for more than a decade. 'I feel as though I've evolved a mental machete for wading through thickets of jargon,' he tells us. 'Despite this, there are still instances where the writing is so dense that I give up, even though the topic of the study might

process is at play in university teaching and testing. A study of first-year South African sociology students found that students were awarded higher marks for conceptual 'highly nominalised' language (Starfield, 2004). Incidentally, as Billig points out, in the very same study the author herself uses highly nominalised language such as 'ideational metafunction' and 'semantic fields', when 'content' and 'concept' would do the job. Yet this style of writing has clearly worked for Starfield, who is now editor of the journal *English for Specific Purposes*, a journal covering academic English.

Cognitive scientist Jim Davies has a theory on the pull of obscure writing. 'I argue that some prefer it because each reader has to do so much work to get any meaning out of it, and when we have to work hard for something, we really value it' (Davies, 2012, p.45). Davies's conclusion is based on 'effort justification', an idea stemming from Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance. Could it be that in the same way one might value a group membership after being put through an initiation ceremony, we place greater worth on works if we are forced to toil through them?

There have been high-profile examples of obscure writing gaining acceptance: in 1996 physicist Alan Sokal successfully submitted an entirely spoof article to a postmodernist journal. But perhaps it is simply that you can fool some of the people some of the time, but

we are not *all* falling victim to a giant case of pluralistic ignorance. In 2006 Daniel Oppenheimer challenged the 'prevailing wisdom' that complicated language increased perceived intelligence. He adjusted student dissertations using an algorithm that simply switched words of nine letters or more with the second shortest entry in Microsoft Word's thesaurus. The simplified abstracts were rated as more intelligent than the original versions. Oppenheimer's acceptance speech for his Ig Nobel prize, which is given for 'Research that makes people laugh and then think', neatly sums up his findings: 'My research shows that conciseness is interpreted as intelligence. So thank you.'

Falling on barren land

Bad writing becomes a particularly serious problem when scientific work is made inaccessible not only to our peers, but to researchers in adjoining fields and to the wider public beyond. Are we creating a generation of researchers who study the same things in similar ways but speak different languages to one another, a Babel filled with numerous disciplinary voices? If so, we risk preventing the cross-pollination of ideas and discoveries within the broad ecosystem of psychology. If readers have to reach for a dictionary – or, worse, tumble into a rabbit hole of successive journal articles – in order to find the meaning of a specialist term, our ideas risk getting lost.

sound fantastically intriguing. When the writing is that bad, it can make your head hurt. Conversely, to discover a well-written journal article is a joy. I find myself wanting to thank the authors for bringing pleasure to my day. That said, if the actual science is poor or boring, an eloquent author won't be enough to convince me to cover the findings.'

A way forward

If we want to understand, resist and, maybe, change how people are doing things in the academic world and elsewhere, then we will have to dream that we can do things differently. We might take note of the verbs – to understand, to resist, to change and to dream – and we might hope, but not expect, to find ways to set these old linguistic servants free on our pages. (Billig, 2013)

You may detect a note of pessimism in Billig's suggestions. Indeed, he feels he is 'whispering in the wind'. The conditions of academia will persist, and the motivation and awareness necessary for change are simply not there. 'Academics today are not writing in answer to a higher calling,' he says. 'We are, to put it bluntly, hacks who write for a living... Most social scientists, like fishes in water, do not notice what they are doing. They just keep swimming through the density of their own prose.'

Can we reach a more optimistic conclusion? There *are* psychologists out there who write with intelligence, clarity and passion. Why not turn to them for an alternative view?

Professor Alex Haslam, a social psychologist at the University of Queensland, studied English at university, and his love of the written word shines through. 'I think that an appreciation of the beauty and musicality of words – as well as their power – is very important,' he tells us. 'Treat language as if it were a Stradivarius not a sledgehammer.' Haslam also describes writing as a critical vehicle for thought. 'Put another way, I often don't know exactly what I think until I have written it, and I use the writing process as a forensic means of honing my own thinking. For this reason it is critical that what one writes is as precise and as economical as possible. There's also a lot to be gained from changing the mysterious into the concrete, and for writing in ways that make it clear what one's own perspective and role is (rather than implying, through omission of these details, that such things don't matter).'

According to Haslam, writing for more popular publications like *The*

Psychologist, *Scientific American Mind* and *New Scientist* can help you hone your skills. 'Writing for those outlets generally forces you to weed out woolly and wasteful prose, because (a) their readership is generally less tolerant of obfuscation and evasion and (b) their format generally places a premium on a high impact to space ratio.'

Others advocate putting the personal back at the centre of psychology, populating that world in order to move away from the science of 'self-reports and finger movements' (Baumeister et al., 2007). Professor Elizabeth Loftus tells us: 'I like to include "stories" in my writing... stories of people who were wrongfully convicted based on someone's faulty memory, stories of a famous person who misremembered something important from their past. Stories grab people and make them interested in learning more about the science behind the story.'

Writing for an online audience can also help tailor your style. Dr Jarrett says: 'When you write online, you often receive instant feedback and this can help you better understand the audience's perspective and expectations. With online writing there is also this sense that you're competing for people's attention. More than ever, you need to learn to grab their eye and lure them in. Once there, don't waste their time whatever you do. Any waffle and they're just one click away from the exit.'

Psychologist and blogger Professor Dorothy Bishop (University of Oxford) agrees that writing for social media helps develop a more readable style. She also tells us that she has had journal referees comment that the language in her papers is 'rather informal': 'I am now old enough to just reply "I take that as a compliment";' she says. Bishop also gives us a simple tip for weeding out those tortuous sentences: 'Just read your work aloud. I do this for most things I publish and it helps a lot. I think it was Alan Baddeley who first told me about this, and he proves the method works – his books are far more readable than most.'

Reading your work back all adds time, and we're back again to the pressured and competitive conditions of academia. But some are convinced this is the key. 'To me, good writing is simple writing,' Professor Uta Frith (University College London) tells us. 'But simple is not fast. In fact it is very slow, and it is all about knowing what *not* to say. Inspired by the Slow Food movement I have tried to argue for slow science. Belatedly, I have realised that I need to argue also for slow writing.'

Professor Frith's advice is this:

'Feel proud if you can delete what has taken lots of time to write. It may seem like a waste of effort, but it's not. Slow food is good because you leave out lots of unnecessary stuff that you believed was important. When writing, it is amazing how the necessary ingredients are revealed only after you have also put in some unnecessary ones and then – slowly and painstakingly – removed them. Actually, it works best when there is another person to read what you wrote and will discuss it with you. This puts in some brakes and is an excellent way to slow down the process. And at the same time it makes it fun.'

Resisting the onslaught

We've heard from some of the very best psychologists: when the chips are down the top dogs come up smelling of roses. If we can just follow their advice, hit that bullseye, the rest of the dominoes should fall like a house of cards. Checkmate.

OK, so maybe we're as guilty of bad writing as anybody. And our clumsy, idealistic pleading may fall on deaf ears. Perhaps we are preaching mainly to the new generation. As Billig writes, 'I can see young postgraduates struggling to understand what they know they must read. Sometimes, I see their confidence draining away in the face of big words, as if they were failing the test that defines whether they are fit to think intellectually. I want to tell them to trust their own supposed inadequacies, for their failings might protect them from the onslaught of big words.'

So our message for students and anyone else who will listen... take time over your writing; it matters. Don't drain it of colour. Put yourself and others back into the worlds you write about. Above all consider your audience and try to write in smaller words for bigger circles.

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Have your say

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