

### Putting Poetry Back into Public Language

The English language, as it happens, has more words than any other. The Oxford English dictionary lists 650 000 and that excludes millions of scientific and technical terms. About 200 000 English words are in common use, compared for example to 100 000 in French.

But the sad thing is that with all those verbal riches arrayed before us and with English becoming more and more sought-after, the number of words actually being used by most people is shrinking.

We live in an age of jargon and cliché. We can barely put together a sentence without including going forward, stakeholder, value-added, empower and prioritise.

Not only are these words stultifying because they are overused. They are business jargon and so they don't reach out to ordinary people who think in a different language.

The essence of Don Watson's savage attack on the decay of public language, *Death Sentence*, is that it has lost its soul.

Like him, I see how the language of marketing and management has crept into politics, education and even war. As he says, these languages are not good for the health of a society: marketing is not particularly concerned with the truth and the focus of management is narrow compared with the depth and potential of humanity.

Watson goes on: "In addition, their language lacks almost everything needed to put in words an opinion or an emotion; to explain the complex, paradoxical or uncertain; to tell a joke...It leaves us speechless."

**So the problem is not just that marketingspeak and managementspeak are hard to understand and often impenetrably abstract and boring.** They are also lacking in depth, subtlety and power; in humanity.

Says Watson: "Business language is a desert...Only when language is alive does truth have a chance." Echoing George Orwell's reference to anaesthetic language, he writes: "You cannot read it without losing some degree of consciousness."

While Watson's book is a masterpiece of rhetoric, I think he goes a bit too far. After all, lots of things have to be written in business which are by their very nature hair-raisingly complex and difficult to make exciting and interesting.

On the other hand, not everything is so hard. And when an organisation is reaching out to the man in the street or other businesses, it makes sense not to bore and confuse the hell out of them.

In other words, marketingspeak is often counter-productive even in business terms. For any writer to lose contact with his audience is fatal; if that writer is trying to convince, persuade, sell an idea or a product, he is not going to be successful.

**The remarkable thing about companies and many other organisations** is that they often have two separate ways of reaching out to the public which just don't talk the same language. The one channel is vibrant, fresh, eye-catching and quirky. The other tends to churn out material on a sort of business-language conveyor belt.

Perhaps you've guessed what those channels are. The first is advertising, put together by an advertising company where people in trendy clothes are encouraged to be as creative, and different as possible. The other is the marketing and communications, or even general operations, part of a company.