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Edspeak and the Double Adjectival Vacuity

Abstract

Educational thought is jeopardized by a particularly empty form of educational discourse, here dubbed "Edspeak." One of the chief rhetorical devices of Edspeak is what might be called the "double adjectival vacuity." The semantic properties and political advantages of this pervasive rhetorical device are discussed.

Résumé

La pensée pédagogique est menacée par une forme particulièrement vide de discours pédagogique à laquelle on a donné le surnom anglais de "Edspeak." L'une des principales caractéristiques rhétoriques de Edspeak est ce qu'on pourrait appeler la "double vacuité adjectivale." L'auteur analyse les propriétés sémantiques et les avantages politiques de ce procédé rhétorique omniprésent.

When I think in language, there aren't 'meanings' going through my mind in addition to the verbal expressions: the language is itself the vehicle of thought.

Ludwig Wittgenstein
Philosophical Investigations

Over thirty years ago, James Koerner in *The Miseducation of American Teachers* (1963) complained that educators had abandoned the English language and put in its place a "pernicious patois" that Koerner dubbed "Educanto." Koerner's complaint was not just that educators

lacked a felicitous prose style or wrote in a particularly unfriendly technical jargon. Rather, his charge was (and still is) more serious than that:

Educanto is a deadly serious phenomenon: it masks a lack of thought, supports a specious scientism, thrives on slogans and incantations, and repels any educated mind that happens upon it. Until Education can carry on its business in decent English, most other reforms are handicapped, for they cannot even be discussed intelligibly. (p. 21)

In the last chapter of *Miseducation*, “English or Educanto?,” Koerner gives numerous examples of the ludicrous excesses of Educanto – all of which were culled from the so-called “professional literature” in education, that is, from various journal articles, books, and textbooks in such fields as educational psychology, educational administration, curriculum studies, and so on.

As appalling as the language of this professional literature is, there is an even more virulent form of Educanto which, in deference to George Orwell’s original insight about the political uses of language, ought to be called “Edspeak.” Edspeak is a kind of regional dialect of Educanto – an even more pernicious patois which one is most apt to hear in the political domain of education. Edspeak is the *lingua franca* of educational task-force reports, ministry documents, educational mission statements, school board directives, tendered research proposals, curriculum guidelines, and the like. This degenerate off-shoot of Educanto typically sounds (or reads) something like this:

If future teachers are to foster meaningful performance-based outcomes, they will need to adopt flexible teaching-and-learning strategies that promote both essential individualized competencies and positive collaborative experiences.

This particular sentence is fictional and contrived, but anyone reasonably familiar with this political “underliterature” of education will, I trust, vouch for its verisimilitude. Even though the sentence is made-up, it is (to put it oxymoronically) a genuine imitation. What accounts for the sentence’s verisimilitude is, I believe, its heavy reliance upon a particular rhetorical device that I will call “the double adjectival vacuity.” This device is perhaps the single most common stylistic feature of Edspeak. As my label suggests, its construction consists of two successive adjectives followed by a noun – but not just any kind of adjectives or any kind of noun.

If you re-read the contrived sentence above, you will see that it contains four instances of the double adjectival vacuity: meaningful performance-based outcomes; flexible teaching-and-learning strategies; essential individualized competencies; and positive collaborative experiences.

With a minimum of intellectual effort, it is easy enough to recycle the same sentence frame by simply substituting four new double adjectival vacuities in place of the old ones, to wit:

If future teachers are to foster [life-long cognitive skills],
they will need to adopt [effective school-based initiatives]
that promote both [practical resource-based programs] and
[supportive community-based partnerships].

Again, I presume the reader will agree that this new sentence also sounds all-too-familiar. What accounts for this odd recursive feature of Edspeak? The explanation, I think, lies in the special semantic properties of the adjectives and nouns strung together in the double adjectival vacuity.

On the following page is a table that lists some twenty such vacuities. Each row of the table (reading from left to right) gives an example of this common Edspeak locution. Some are contrived; most are genuine. All are composed of actual adjectives and nouns that appear repeatedly in two recent specimens of Edspeak: one, a ministry curriculum document (1992) and the other, a board of education reaction paper (1991).

The table, however, discloses an especially alarming feature of these vacuities, that is, their near-random interchangeability. To illustrate, pick a word, any word, from each of the table's three columns and then arrange them in A-B-C sequence. Almost invariably, you will have coined an authentic bit of Edspeak. For example, if I use my telephone area code (519) as a random means for selecting words from the three columns, then I get: innovative global competencies. Now it wouldn't surprise me if, somewhere in the burgeoning Edspeak literature on global education, someone has written about "today's need to develop innovative global competencies for tomorrow's challenges. . ." or some such. I admit that this particular randomly-generated vacuity (innovative global competencies) sounds a little more awkward than others which one might assemble more deliberately, say, "effective global leadership." But even so, awkwardness of expression in Edspeak is really only a matter of very slight degree!

Table 1
Edspeak Vacuities

	A	B	C
1.	changing	global	needs
2.	meaningful	performance-based	outcomes
3.	flexible	teaching-and-learning	strategies
4.	essential	individualized	evaluation
5.	innovative	educational	decision-making
6.	positive	collaborative	experiences
7.	life-long	cognitive	skills
8.	effective	school-based	initiatives
9.	personal(ized)	cross-curricular	competencies
10.	practical	resource-based	programs
11.	supportive	community-based	partnerships
12.	flexible	broad-based	technologies
13.	continuous	professional	development
14.	comprehensive	classroom-based	activities
15.	creative	cooperative	problem solving
16.	continuous	goal-based	assessment
17.	holistic	integrated	knowledge
18.	ongoing	team-oriented	planning
19.	quality	student-focused	instruction
20.	active	in-school	leadership

Like the three-column table, there are children's books which are based upon the same sort of syntactic principle. Their pages are cut and put together in such a way that various parts of simple sentences can be permuted and aligned to create novel sentences. So, for example, parts of a sentence, such as "Father walked the dog," can be swapped with those of another, say, "Sister ate the cake," to produce such amusing childish nonsense as "Father ate the dog" or "Sister walked the cake." But everyone, even the young child, knows that these jumbled sentences are nonsense. How is it then that the vacuous nonsense of Edspeak manages to escape detection – even by adults?

Clearly, the answer lies in the special kinds of adjectives and nouns that typify Edspeak. Consider the list of nouns in column C of the table, that is, experiences, technologies, outcomes, and so on. These nouns are at or near the very highest level of abstraction and generality. Without further specification, they can (and do) refer to almost everything, in general, and, therefore, nothing, in particular. It is their rarefied level of abstraction that virtually guarantees their vacuity. These nouns, without some further modification, are essentially empty or without referents. Koerner describes a similar class of abstract nouns in *Educanto* which he calls "ritual words" or "words that serve any purpose with any subject on any occasion" (p. 292).

Now consider the list of adjectives in column A of the table, that is, creative, innovative, supportive, practical, and such. These adjectives, like the nouns, are also flexibly abstract. But more importantly, nearly all of these adjectives are ringed with a positive halo. Almost all carry essentially positive connotations. For most linguistic purposes, they are “good” adjectives. To verify this semantic property, one need only consider their opposites: uncreative, noninnovative, unsupportive, impractical.

There are, however, a few adjectives in column A whose positive connotations are somewhat peculiar to educational usage, especially, continuous, changing, ongoing, active, and the like. These dynamic or motile adjectives serve to invigorate or enliven Edspeak’s depictions of public education – an image obviously at odds with its reputation for inert bureaucracy and static tradition.

These positive adjectives are frequently combined with the super-nouns to produce any number of common phrases in Edspeak, for example, creative leadership, challenging initiatives, supportive partnerships, and so on. But such vacuous phrases, while not exactly meaningless, are still too abstract or decontextualized to serve, by themselves, the specialized educational purposes of Edspeak. What is needed is some way of locating these desirable generalities in educational space. This is usually accomplished by simply adding the kinds of adjectives listed in column B, that is, global, goal-based, student-focused, and the like. These adjectives not only give the vacuity an educational twist, but they often convey a specious kind of tangibility or location. Their addition helps vaguely to anchor or locate the vacuity in educational reality. This is why, I suspect, an uncommon number of these adjectives are suffixed with the word “-based.” This suffix, by itself, asserts that something (no matter how vague) is solidly grounded.

So here are the basic steps for composing a double adjectival vacuity. First, choose a highly abstract (preferably trendy) noun whose possible referents are virtually limitless. Then modify this super-noun with a “good”, all-purpose adjective to give it a positive spin. Finally, insert a second adjective between them that will ground the vacuity in some broad educational locale.

By reducing the construction of vacuities to a three-step formula, I do not mean to suggest that someone speaking or writing in Edspeak consciously applies such a formula. The formula is merely a way of highlighting several of the definitive features of Edspeak. Isolating these features helps to make plain the pernicious consequences of this educational patois, that is, how Edspeak mostly subverts intelligent thought and discussion about education.

The “substance” of Edspeak consists almost entirely of highly abstract nouns, that is, nouns which have no specific meaning or clear reference. The super-nouns of Edspeak function more like semantic place holders that are capable of taking on any number of meanings or interpretations – which is why any combination of adjectives and nouns in the table seems to make sense. Unlike the concrete, “Father-ate-the-dog” absurdities of the children’s books, it is more difficult to distinguish sense from nonsense in Edspeak. In fact, it is perhaps more accurate to describe Edspeak as mostly without sense (that is, meaning) rather than as nonsense (that is, foolishness). This lack of specific meaning, nevertheless, implies that people who communicate in Edspeak, quite literally, do not know what they are talking about. The all-purpose generalities of Edspeak are incapable of sustaining focused discussion and argument.

There are, of course, certain obvious political advantages associated with such empty discourse. “School-based initiatives” (as they say) wrapped in the grandiloquence of Edspeak are nearly unintelligible and, hence, almost impossible to discuss or criticize responsibly. If you then impart to such “initiatives” a further positive adjectival spin (say, innovative school-based initiatives), then even responsible criticism and resistance can be made to seem like insubordination or willful noncompliance.

In addition, the vacuous, unbounded proposals of Edspeak are likely to be compatible with any number of actual “school-based” circumstances. Such “flexible initiatives” allow their political sponsors either to claim any successes or disavow any failures that result from their implementation. The inherent equivocations of Edspeak thus serve to frustrate the demand for accountability in public education. In short, because education is governed and administered by a top-down bureaucracy, the linguistic liabilities of Edspeak turn out to be political assets.

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