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Proper Words in Proper Places

THE head of a large British company was reported recently to have written for his senior officers a pamphlet entitled *How to Write a Letter*. His rules for "succinct business letter writing" were based on brevity, accuracy and simplicity. It is to be hoped that notice will be taken of them, not only by members of his own staff, but by people elsewhere in commercial and public offices. Nor need the reforms be confined to the writing of letters. Why, for instance, should passengers in buses be told not to "converse" with the drivers when "talk" gives the Anglo-Saxon meaning? Why should it be said that someone has "passed away" when in fact he is dead? And why is it so often assumed that all men are gentlemen and all women are ladies, or that people are not old—but merely "elderly"—until they have reached an almost fabulous age? In the plain affairs of life it should be possible to explain ourselves simply. The businessman who writes a letter, and the public servant who writes a memorandum, may both save time and promote efficiency if they use few and homely words. Sometimes, of course, obscurity is deliberate, since on delicate issues it may seem wise or prudent to remain ambiguous. The cult of vagueness is not always followed innocently. Moreover, even when succinctness is desirable it can be carried too far, and it is by no means a substitute for all the literary virtues. In recent years we have been much afflicted with alphabetical titles. They are intended to be labels for groups and activities, especially in international affairs, which otherwise might have titles too cumbersome to be remembered easily. Yet how many people really know what is meant by such words as Unesco, Corso, Unac, Ecosoc and Ticer—to say nothing of FAO, WHO and CCICMS? Much repetition, and a fortunate construction which allows a word to slide easily from the tongue—as in Unesco and Corso—may help people to gain a vague impression of the functions and interests of a body with one of these labels. But conciseness can be just another sort of vagueness when it strips the flesh from words and runs them together in rough alliance. Even more dangerous can be the exponent of literal and accurate meaning when he strays into literature. A translation of the Bible in Basic English may have all the facts and thoughts (though sometimes only by using strange constructions), but it loses the reverence, the feeling of antiquity and the human associations which survive in the noble archaisms of the Authorised Version. Language is a living thing, and while it is growing it is acquiring a symbolism of experience. "I remain, dear sir," may give pain to the author of *How to Write a Letter*, and in present-day usage it may be incongruous; but if we come upon it in a collection of letters written a hundred years ago we enjoy the flavour of a period as we stand attentively at the writer's elbow. Words may be used for different reasons, and there are different kinds of accuracy. A mood or a scene is evoked imperfectly by saying merely: "It was a day without wind in Wellington." The poet, certainly, will want to say more. Perhaps it is enough to suggest that business letters should not be written as if they were essays, and that essays sometimes require words with more than two syllables. The use of language is various, and although purification is often necessary it cannot be dictated or imposed from above unless something has been done in the schools to improve standards of speaking and writing. We suspect that some strangely bald and uncomfortable letters will be written in the London offices where support may no longer be taken from phrases which in the past have eased the pangs of composition.