



# THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA

## MONTHLY LETTER

HEAD OFFICE: MONTREAL, AUGUST 1955

### *The Right Word*

**T**HE MAGIC OF WORDS lies in the power they have, when properly chosen and arranged, to convey to other people what we wish them to know of what is in our minds.

Every word we write goes out on an errand. Skill in saying what we mean so as to get the result we desire is not a literary frill around the edges of business and social life. It is an essential part of life, our only means of intellectual contact with the world around us.

We have developed communication to a high technical standard. We can talk with someone at the other side of the world, and we can bounce a radar beam off the moon. But we may live to enjoy these luxuries only if we learn to converse more effectively with one another about such things as the atom bomb.

On the level of social and business life the ability to communicate freely and intelligently is needed if our important thoughts are to be well-formulated and carried into action. All of us have experienced the provoking state of knowing things of deep meaning but finding, when we came to express them, that we forgot the words.

How superior in its efficiency and attractiveness is the letter we receive from a man who uses dynamic words that give needed information by contrast with the letter we receive from a man who has the lazy habit of using limp words that leave us doubtful about his meaning and inspire us not at all.

The first question to ask one's self when starting dictation in the morning or sitting down to write to a member of the family is not "What words shall I use?" More pertinent questions are: "Why am I going to write this letter? To please myself? So that the carbon copy will make a good impression on the man higher up? To carry a thought of mine to the person I am addressing?"

Words are a means of saying things. A sermon, an excuse for failure to do something, an essay like this, a legal decision or brief, a letter home, a tender for a

million dollar order: what are these but words? But they are words that the writers have learned to put together in such a form as to accomplish the purpose they have in mind.

#### *The best word*

There are two ways of appraising the rightness of a word: by its effectiveness in saying exactly what we wish it to say, and by its sound or its appearance. Some words, though acceptable or passable in conversation, are not legal tender in writing; other words, properly and effectively used in writing, seem pretentious in conversation.

Quite often, the choice between a right and a wrong word is not dictated by a book of reference but by the writer's perception. Everyone of moderate education knows how words that are associated with the commonplace grate on the eye or ear when used in more formal or more tender communication. This sensitiveness to the rightness of words can be developed.

It would be a mistake to become over-dainty. While it is true that we benefit by knowing that words have ancestors — Greek, Latin, Anglo-Saxon, and all other sorts — it is not necessary to know a word's genealogical tree before using it. Does it say what we mean? Is it appropriate in its setting? Do we like it?

Our choice of words should not be dictated by hard-and-fast rules. Letters and articles composed by people who follow the book slavishly are likely to be accurately dull.

But it is well to have some rules. For example, the rule about preferring short words to long is a good rule for general occasions. When we have a choice between two words that convey our meaning equally well, we should use the short and familiar one. But the other word should not be rejected merely because it is long and unusual if it is more fitting in meaning. It is the inappropriate use of long words that causes trouble.

Good usage of words cannot be learned from dictionaries and grammars, still less from a brief essay like this. Language lives in use. To use a word well, and even forcibly, we do not need to "know what it means" in the sense of being able to say "this word means so-and-so." We do need more than casual acquaintance with good literature, so that an instinct toward the first-rate directs our choice.

Those who are interested in the structure of words and how they are built into correct sentences will find much that is useful in the Fowler books: H. W. and F. G. Fowler: *The King's English*, and H. W. Fowler: *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, published by the Oxford University Press.

### *About definitions*

It has been remarked that some of our most exasperating controversies would cease at once if one of the disputants would take the time and have the courage to say precisely and briefly what he understands by the terms that are being used.

Is it not true that many an argument carried on face-to-face or by letter fizzles out when the parties get to know what each is talking about? So long as two people hold forth on the level of their own ideas and neglect to find out how these ideas mesh with the ideas of their opposition, just so long will they tire themselves out and wear down stenographers in futile disputation.

It isn't necessary to define everything, but only to define things that may not be clear to either party, and to draw pictures or plans when these will help both parties toward understanding.

Definition is not in itself a final argument. A definition is not true or false, except under the circumstances. An amusing example is given in C. J. Herrick's *The Thinking Machine*: "If I define a man as a biped without feathers, then a plucked chicken is a man."

Definitions are useful starting points. They help us to avoid fruitless argument. They restrain unintellectual people from making themselves pests, and when we use definitions in our thinking they help us to keep on the right track.

### *Broad vocabulary*

The broader your vocabulary, the more deft you will be in expressing yourself in simple language, and the more readily you will pick up another's meaning without strain.

One does not need all the words in the language. Shakespeare used only twenty-five thousand, Milton was content with twelve thousand, and Chaucer had eight thousand: yet their plays and poems and stories live on as models of clear, picturesque writing.

Nor does one need great scholarship to give expression to what is in him. John Bunyan, whose only book of learning was the Bible, wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which to this day, though written in the 17th century, has been one of the most widely read books. There is no "fine writing" in Bunyan's work: it is in the plainest of language, fitting to its purpose.

Words change, and we need to revise our word-habits from time to time if we are to keep pace with life and custom. If language did not change, if words did not take on new meanings, if events did not compel us to coin new words, we should all be at the far end of a dead-end street. You could not explain Einstein's theories to a university class in Aristotelian Greek, or issue orders for the running of a mechanized factory in Cicero's Latin, or apply for a line of credit in Molière's dramatic French. Words are instruments for the expression of current life-experiences, and vehicles for the communication of ideas.

Every word we use was at first a stroke of genius. Even the coldest, most matter-of-fact word of today was once a glowing metaphor. The words that seem odd to us because they are new will some day, if they are useful words, become commonplace.

Rules for making and using words are not immutable natural laws, but simply conventions among educated people. There is an accepted standard of good language, and the fact that it is always changing in keeping with changing social forces is no reason for abandoning it. We have to keep looking over our shoulder at the past if we are to retain our sense of direction through the morass of slang, jargon, and the crude lingo of newspaper headlines.

Two examples will show how words change under the impact of widening knowledge or under the capriciousness of lax use. Take "atomic". It means literally "indivisible" but has now completely reversed its meaning. When we talk of atomic energy we are thinking of nuclear fission. Thus we have, as Joshua Whatmough points out in *Studies in Honour of Gilbert Norwood* (University of Toronto Press), turned a negative into a positive, almost as if "no" had come to mean "yes."

As an example of how language becomes disordered without any apparent reason, consider the word "fact", a word called "slippery" by James Bryant Conant, President of Harvard. It came from the Latin, where its meaning was "a thing done or performed", and that is its meaning in the *Oxford Dictionary*. But "fact" has become so vague that it is no longer trusted alone, and has to be guarded and supported by other words such as "true, actual, real, honest". In common use, a satirical person might say, my opinion is a fact, while your fact is a theory.

## Words are labels

Language is not knowledge, but merely a tool for learning. Words are not things, but labels we put on things for their ready identification.

In early days, words themselves took on magic power: like "Open Sesame" swinging wide the door of Ali Baba's treasure cave. In those days the link between a word and the person or thing designated by it was a real and substantial bond.

Today, those who seek mature ways of thinking and writing and speaking are continually aware of the dangers we encounter in accepting the label for the thing, in using the same label for two different things or ideas, or in using different labels for things that are, in their essence, alike.

Some, seeking to teach young children, have adopted the plan of saying "we call this" as a prefix to telling the name of something: "we call this a pin, but that we call a button." A moment's thought will convince us that such a statement is much more correct than: "this is a pin and that is a button."

A word is not a thing, but the name of a thing. The marks we make on paper are not motors, machines, desks, employees, sadness, and happiness, but merely the names by which we know these things. The thoughts we put on paper by the use of words are not our beliefs, but footprints in the sand by which a reader may see the way our minds go. The clearer we make our words, the greater chance there is of the reader following our footsteps closely.

Utility justifies our way of writing and talking, imperfect though it may be. We either label or remain ignorant. We must have names for things if we are to think of them. An essay in *The Language of Wisdom and Folly* (Harper and Brothers, New York) has this to say: "Can we be said to know what a pigeon is unless we know that it is a pigeon? . . . if we are not able to name it except vaguely as a 'bird', we seem to be separated from it by an immense distance of ignorance."

There are more than two billion beings on this earth to whom we apply the word "man." They have great variety of complexion, features, age, habits and knowledge, but they have similarities that make the word "man" appropriate to all. It becomes important, if we are to segregate one person or a group of persons, that we speak and write with some particularity. We name the person, as "John Jones", or we name the group, as "Eskimoes", or we differentiate in one way or another: by education, by religion, by profession, by ethical standards (good or bad). All these are useful, but we must keep in mind that they are only labels used for convenience; they must not be regarded as telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

## Style

One's style of putting words together should be one's own. As John Galsworthy, the English novelist, said in his foreword to W. H. Hudson's *Green Mansions*: "To write well, even to write clearly, is a wondrous business, long to learn, hard to learn, and no gift of the angels."

The writer's purpose, whether he is composing an immortal ode or the reply to a letter from a critical customer, is to convey an idea with the smallest possible obstacle to the flow of thought between mind and mind.

When we succeed in making ourselves clear, that is splendid, but most of us will wish to do better: we should like to make our meaning clear in a pleasing way; to bring a certain sort of sunshine into our writing. We cannot do that by using dingy words.

The value of a piece of gold jewellery is made up of two parts, the value of the gold and the value of the workmanship. Similarly, the worth of a piece of writing is made up of its intrinsic material — the thought — and the skill with which the words describing it are put together. The skill is not skill in copying. We shouldn't try to write like Churchill, but we are quite justified in trying to write as effectively as Churchill would write if he were doing our jobs.

Don't polish too highly. There comes a point beyond which additional sandpapering merely weakens your words and sentences. *The Pilgrim's Progress* is composed in the lowest style of English. If you were to polish it you would at once destroy its reality. For example, to "polish up" the extract from Bunyan's book that is sculptured on the altar in the memorial chamber in Canada's Parliament Buildings would ruin it: "so he passed over, and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side."

## Three virtues

There are three qualities needed in words: accuracy, clarity and simplicity.

Having collected the best evidence to support what we are to write (for we cannot divorce accurate language from accurate thought) then we must take care to clothe our ideas and images in precise words.

The second quality is a "must". The more clearly we write, though at the expense of a little time and some pains, the more easily and surely we will be understood. If we flow muddily, too careless or too lazy to spend the time and endure the labour of clarifying our stream of thoughts, we must not expect our readers to catch all our intended meanings.

The core of what we wish to say may be eaten out by use of abstract words. Even if we have a soft spot in our hearts for abstract nouns like fraternity, peace, pros-

perity, and goodwill, we have to bring our letters and our talk within the bounds of people who are interested in realities.

We must write within the word knowledge of our audience, if we are to make sure of being properly understood. Edgar Dale, writing in *The News Letter*, published by the Bureau of Educational Research of Ohio State University, tells an amusing illustrative story: "A little girl told her mother that the superintendent of the Sunday school said he would drop them into the furnace if they missed three Sundays in succession. He had said that he would drop them from the register."

To take pains to write simply may seem to be catering to the indolence of the reader at the expense of the fatigue of the writer. But if the writer wishes to convey ideas satisfactorily, what other choice has he? And if he doesn't wish to convey ideas correctly, why write?

If you must use a hard word, make your context illuminate it. In both business and private life we are bound to come upon circumstances in which a complexity must be dealt with. Then is when you specially need to search your memory, and perhaps a book of synonyms, for words to make your meaning clear.

Many persons will learn with surprise the result of an inquiry by the Florida Health Officers Society into people's understanding of twenty words commonly used in health discussions. Of the 100 persons questioned, only 46 knew the meaning of "citrus fruit," only 33 knew the word "nutrition," and the word "maternity" meant nothing more than a kind of dress to most of the women patients.

### *Be specific and concrete*

To be specific is to take a big step toward being understood. Make your nouns and verbs tell precisely what you are talking about and what action you expect.

So long as we prefer generalizations and abstractions to concrete words which lie as close to things themselves as our minds can reach, we will remain, says Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch in his book *On the Art of Writing*, at the best, writers at second-hand.

Sometimes we have no choice, but when we must use an abstract word it is nearly always possible to clarify it in nearby concrete words. "Observe," says Quiller-Couch, "how, when Shakespeare has to use the abstract noun 'concealment', on an instant it turns into a visible worm 'feeding' on the visible rose; how, having to use a second abstract word 'patience', at once he solidifies it in tangible stone." (*Twelfth Night II iv 112*)

Self-examination will reveal whether a tendency to use abstractions is caused by careless diction or by

timidity. The vagueness of abstract words is one of the reasons for their popularity. To express one's thoughts accurately is hard work, and to be precise is sometimes dangerous.

Sir Ernest Gowers remarks in his *ABC of Plain Words*: "To resist this temptation, and to resolve to make your meaning plain to your reader even at the cost of some trouble to yourself, is more important than any other single thing if you would convert a flabby style into a crisp one."

### *On being workmanlike*

Words are forceful or weak, judged by the accuracy with which they do their work. Not every occasion calls for a dynamic word. If you use too liberally words like vital, urgent, danger, crisis, disaster, fatal, grave, and essential, they lose their force. Then you are tempted to put "very" in front of some, and to telescope others nonsensically, like "urgently and gravely essential." Find the strongest word warranted by the occasion, and let it stand on its feet without adjectival or adverbial support.

Anyone seeking to write clearly, accurately, and with a touch of grace will avoid the use of superfluous adjectives. It is a good habit to go over a piece of composition and challenge every adjective: make it declare its usefulness.

Some business people who have been successful in promoting sales have found that a plain statement, seeming to lack sophistication, laughed at by competitors for its simplicity, has done its work effectively.

When we move from business to private life for examples, we see how much better a simple, known, word is than one that has a more lordly air: how much more at ease we feel after getting a hearty welcome than after being granted a cordial reception; how much more comfortable we are with friendship, rather than with amity, with love rather than with charity: how much happier we are with happiness than with felicity.

The most important question we can ask ourselves about a word is this: is it doing the job as efficiently and as brightly as another word might do?

Our letters and reports need not be literary masterpieces, but they must be workmanlike. Let us write in keeping with our theme and purpose, finding the right word to convey the meaning that is in our minds, avoiding exaggeration and over-emphasis. Let us remember that words are only labels and that these labels must mean the same to our readers as to us. Let us tell ourselves every morning at the beginning of dictation time that the many-voiced monotony of business letters and reports is unnecessary.