The Occasional Address

Faculty of Education and Social Work Graduation Ceremony
The Great Hall, University of Sydney
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Your Excellency the Chancellor who, in my view, is the finest Governor of NSW ever to grace this position; Pro Vice-Chancellor; Chair of the Academic Board; Acting Dean of the Faculty of Education and Social Work, my friend Associate Professor Robyn Ewing whose outstanding contribution to this University has just been recognised a few minutes ago by the Vice-Chancellor’s Award; academic colleagues, other members of staff; other distinguished guests; ladies and gentlemen; and, especially, graduates. For, above all else, today is a wonderful day for you and your families. One thing is certain, irrespective of whether you have been in this profession for some time, or you are a ‘neophyte’: you’ll never forget this day for the rest of your lives.

To have been invited to speak at today’s Graduation is a great thrill for me. Ever since I was a little boy there have been two Sydney sacred sites for me. In 1951 as a starry eyed 8 year old Newcastle lad, I walked into the Sydney Cricket Ground to watch Australia play a Test match against England. Even before that day, and ever since, the SCG has been a sacred site for me.

A couple of years earlier, I had set foot in this Great Hall of this great University, my original Sydney sacred site, to watch my uncle Tom Siddle graduate in Economics. I am delighted that the late Tom’s son my cousin Greg and his wife Jill are in the Great Hall here today. My Dad’s photograph of me on that day had as its caption “Paul’s first appearance at Sydney Uni”. Dad hoped that I would return as a student to enjoy what he had been denied. A brilliant school student, his outstanding Leaving Certificate results in 1931 meant that he easily won matriculation into this University. He passionately wanted to study Law. But he lived in Newcastle. And he would be starting his studies in 1932: at the height of the Depression. His parents could not afford to pay for Dad’s accommodation here in Sydney. It was a lifelong regret for him, even though he eventually became one of Australia’s most respected newspaper editors. To my parents’ delight, I did return years later. My amazing 91 year old Mum, still living and thriving in Newcastle, wishes she could return here today too.

An additional thrill for me is the fact that my wife Dr Jackie Manuel, a Senior Lecturer in this Faculty, is sitting up here with me on the stage and our two very clever and beautiful young daughters, Sophia and Amelia, are sitting down there in the front row.

The University of Sydney has played, and continues to play, a pivotal role in my life. I spent four wonderful years here in the 1960s, graduating in this Great Hall in 1966 with my first degree, a BA Honours Degree in English. Much more recently, I was delighted to be appointed an Adjunct Professor in the Faculty of Education and Social Work.
It is a challenge to say something that is not banal or cliché-ridden within a Graduation Address of 10 minutes or so. So, I thought I might focus today on one issue that is central not only to the role of educators, but to all citizens living in and contributing to our democratic Australian society. I refer to language. We should always be aware of the power and significance of language, and the crucial role that it plays in our lives.

In 1990, during my time as an advisor on the personal staff of the then Commonwealth Minister for Employment, Education and Training, John Dawkins, I drafted the Introduction to the Hawke Government’s Australia’s Language and Literacy Policy Green Paper - The Language of Australia: Discussion Paper on an Australian Literacy and Language Policy for the 1990s.

I hasten to add that I joined Dawkins’ staff in Canberra after – and not before – he carried out his ‘Dawkinisation’ of the Tertiary Education System in Australia.

Dawkins agreed to affix his signature to the Introduction I had written for him. In the opening sentence I attempted to articulate the power and significance of language in the following words, which I still hold to be true today: “It is through language that we develop our thoughts, shape our experience, explore our customs, structure our community, construct our laws, articulate our values and give expression to our hopes and ideals.”

During my time on Dawkins’ staff, Don Watson was Paul Keating’s speech writer and a notable presence within the Ministerial Wing of the Federal Parliament. His book, Death Sentence: The Decay of Public Language, deserves to be compulsory reading for every educator: indeed, by every citizen. Watson brilliantly savages the rubbish that so often purports to be effective communication, today. He strips off the pretence of politically correct pompous managerial-speak. He shows how linguistic sludge – and its uncritical acceptance by a society that should know better - has cast a pall over clarity of thought, imagination, innovation, administration, and enterprise.

Last year I was asked by an academic journal to review a book on education. The back cover boldly proclaimed that “The book is a ‘must read’ for…educators, administrators and parents…” Let me read out just one small passage from this book.

There is no difficulty in seeing that ANT is not about traced networks but about network-tracing activity…there is not a net and an actor laying down the net, but there is an actor [or actant] whose definition of the world outlines, traces, delineates, describes, shadows forth, inscrolls, files, lists, records, marks, or tags a trajectory that is called a network. No net exists independently of the very act of tracing it, and no tracing is done by an actor exterior to the net. A network is not a thing but the recorded movement of a thing.

What ludicrous mumbo jumbo! As educators and as educated citizens we have a responsibility to be lucid in the ways we express our thoughts, ideas and values. Sludgy, clichéd, jargonistic, language is evidence of sludgy, clichéd, jargonistic, thinking.
Indeed, going further, language can be the vehicle for subtle and, not so subtle, forms of nastiness: through obfuscation and euphemism. In 1979 the United States National Council for the Teaching of English Doublespeak Award was given to the nuclear power industry as a whole: “For inventing a whole lexicon of jargon and euphemisms used before, during, and after the Three Mile Island accident and serving to downplay the dangers of nuclear accidents”. An explosion was called ‘energetic disassembly’, and a fire, ‘rapid oxidation’. A reactor accident was an ‘event’, an ‘incident’, an ‘abnormal evolution’, a ‘normal aberration’ or a ‘plant transient’. Plutonium contamination was masqueraded as either ‘infiltration’, or ‘plutonium has taken up residence’.”

Indeed, the causes of that 1979 Three Mile Island disaster illustrate the fact that sometimes the deliberate obfuscation of communication through language, can produce chaos. I once shared a lecture platform in Ottawa with an applied linguist, Professor Catherine B Smith, who delivered one of the most fascinating papers I have ever heard. She had been given special security clearance by the US Library of Congress to enable her to read every piece of written communication within the Pennsylvania plant in the period leading up to the event.

She proved that the 3 Mile Island Nuclear Plant disaster was a failure not of science, but of communication. The plant was run according to a strict military-like hierarchical regime. It was the young, untenured, scientists who detected the alarm bells. But, rather than write reports to their superiors in the direct language which would have revealed the failures of those higher in command, these young scientists "covered their assed", as my American colleague put it, by using prose which obfuscated and camouflaged the truth. There was enough in their reports to which they could point in their defence if a disaster were to occur. But they avoided any risk of direct criticism and immediate confrontation with their superiors, by underplaying the tone and masking the seriousness of the factual information. Their superiors never detected any urgency in these reports. They were not, therefore, alerted to the dangers. And the meltdown occurred.

The tiniest departure from a written text in its spoken declamation, can also leave indelible footprints in history. For example, Bob Hawke’s famous gaffe “By 1990, no Australian child will be living in poverty” was caused by his spur-of-the-moment departure from his written text – which was "By 1990 no Australian child need live in poverty.” Hawke’s extemporise one word change from “need” to “will” became a damaging political albatross around his neck. Indeed, Bob Hawke recently described it as one of his biggest regrets. John Howard’s “Australian families have never been better off” and “we will keep interest rates at record lows” are more recent examples of linguistic political albatrosses which, along with other factors, this time collectively proved to have fatal consequences for an incumbent Prime Minister.

The use of language can imperil not only one's political reputation, indeed career, – but also one’s very own existence - as the great Renaissance scholar Erasmus warned Sir Thomas More (later canonised as “Saint” Thomas More by the Catholic Church) at the height of Henry VIII's campaign to trap More over the 'matter of the King's divorce'. More had written a long and elegant Latin epitaph which he placed on the front of the vault wherein he had buried his first wife in a special side chapel he had built in 1528 as his private chapel in his Parish Church, St Mary’s Old Church in Chelsea – originally built in the 13th century. Proud of what he had written, some time later More sent the text to his friend Erasmus, who had taken up temporary residence at Cambridge University. They had known each other years before when they were both students at Oxford University.
Assuming that one day his own body would be placed alongside that of his first wife in the vault, More had incorporated an ancient Latin saying, so that the text (when translated into English) concluded as follows: "and after …… years her husband Thomas, after surviving perils from land, from sea, from robbers, and from heretics, died and is buried beside her". Erasmus was horrified by the inclusion of the two Latin words "ab haereticis". He told Thomas that this was precisely the kind of 'smoking gun' evidence Henry VIII was seeking. The King might plausibly use this as evidence that Thomas was accusing King Henry VIII of being a heretic.

So Thomas got something like black tar and painted over those words. Of course Sir Thomas More was eventually executed and his headless body was buried in the Church of St. Peter ad Vincula within the Tower of London – what happened to his head is an even more gruesome story!

Remarkably, 479 years after St Thomas covered over those words, you can still visit the chapel in the little church in Chelsea and run your fingers over that rubbery black stuff, as I have done, and marvel at the still-remaining evidence of Erasmus' advice on the peril of two Latin words. That little side chapel was the only part of the church to survive the London Blitz of World War II.

I would like to finish on this note. Exactly forty years ago, my friend the outstanding British scholar, researcher and teacher, John Dixon wrote that language is “a quicksilver among metals – mobile, living and elusive”. Forty-six years earlier than that, another great 20th Century pioneer in the study and teaching of the English language, George Sampson, famously wrote that: "Every teacher is a teacher of English because every teacher is a teacher in English. We cannot give a lesson in any subject without helping or neglecting the English of our pupils".

So you ‘brand-new’ graduates of this great University and – irrespective of who and what you are teaching –members of what the OECD has called “the knowing and caring profession”, I urge you never to allow the quicksilver of language to be solidified into baser things. And never to forget your responsibilities - as both teachers and life long learners - to appreciate, critique, nourish, and celebrate language in all of its richness, breadth, diversity, and ever-developing vitality.

Good luck to you all.