Ornamental Language: An Abomination unto Society?

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Winston Churchill was a charismatic leader and speaker. His speeches are memorable. During World War II, a time of fear, oppression and a fear of oppression, Churchill’s magnetic oratory gave Britain an expectation of victory over Nazi Germany (Davies, 2005, p. 91). Audiences listened in earnest because Churchill knew the power of language. Where did Churchill learn this power? One source he attributes is the King James Bible. “The Scholars who produced this masterpiece are mostly unknown and unremembered,” stated Churchill (2011). “But they forged an enduring link, literary and religious, between the English-speaking people of the world.” And indeed, the King James Bible was important for both literate and illiterate people, and it was integral for defining the current high-style of writing for its time, but in regards to modern writing, what we see and demand of writing today, the style in the King James Bible is no longer practical.

Christianity is not the same as it was in the past. Like every religion, Christianity adapts to societal changes in order to remain or further its dominance. An inevitable change is the communication method of religious doctrines. The King James Bible was once the universally accepted translation, but now its language is dated. In Alter (2010) explains this transfer:

In the century since the previous centennial was celebrated, two major shifts have taken place: the practice of reading the Bible at all, and of memorizing passages from the Bible has drastically diminished; and the King James Bible has ceased to be the almost universally used translation as readers have been encouraged to use more “accessible” versions, which also happen to be stylistically inferior in virtually all respects. (p. 61)

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New translations of the Bible are praised for their clear, concise prose, for their “clarity.” But what is clarity in prose style? According to Samuel Coleridge, an English poet, literary critic and philosopher, prose style is the clear expression of meaning (Vardy, 2010). Yet, Lanham (2007) does not agree with Coleridge, because according to Coleridge’s definition, good prose only depends upon whether it communicates meaning and subject matter successfully; there is no inherent way of determining if prose is good without analyzing its effect on a society.

Lanham (2007) prefers a different analysis of prose. He explains “at the base of prose style, we find not only the need to communicate but also the spirit of play, the delight in form for its own sake” (p. 87). The Elizabethan writers of the King James Bible had a spirit of play. In order to keep the attention of a predominantly illiterate audience, they had to. The writers gave the text ornament by adding literary devices such as rhyme, rhythm and alliteration. Indeed, their verses were remembered by their rhyme and rhythm. When priests preached to a predominantly illiterate congregation, and when verse memorization was required of children, the ornament was necessary.

To understand the difference of the King James Bible, compare one of its verses to a newer translation. Below is a verse from Leviticus 11:13 from the New Oxford translation:

These you shall regard as detestable among the birds. They shall not be eaten; they are an abomination: the eagle, the vulture, the osprey, the buzzard, the kite of any kind; every raven of any kind; the ostrich, the nighthawk, the sea gull, the hawk of any kind; the little owl, the cormorant, the great owl, the water hen, the desert owl, the carrion vulture, the stork, the heron of any kind, the hoopoe, and the bat.
This is clear, and concise. It relays meaning with “clarity.” Coleridge would be proud. Now, the same verse in the King James Version:

And these are they which ye shall have in abomination among the fowls; they shall not be eaten, they are an abomination: the eagle, and the ossifrage, and the ospray, And the vulture, and the kite after his kind; Every raven after his kind; And the owl, and the night hawk, and the cuckow, and the hawk after his kind, And the little owl, and the cormorant, and the great owl, And the swan, and the pelican, and the gier eagle, And the stork, the heron after her kind, and the lapwing, and the bat.

Give notice to the ornament. Instead of listing what should not be eaten in random order, the writer pairs sounds and like-suffixes and prefixes together (“Ossifrage and the ospray”). A sense of rhythm comes from the use of repetition (“the kite after his kind…the raven after his kind…the hawk after his kind”). The writer also mirrors phrases with alliteration and rhyme (“the great owl…the gier eagle”).

The demise of the King James Bible is but a causality of the quiet extermination of ornamental language and poetic prose. Illiterate people were once common, now they are rare. The need to keep people entertained by reading aloud has diminished. Once language was a gift that people cherished, now it is a merely a method of communication. America, in particular, values content more than the writer’s style of delivery. Is this detrimental to writing? It could be argued both ways. Sometimes ornament is unnecessary. Why would a researcher want to cipher through figurative language when his or her only purpose is to find certain information? But is ornament so unnecessary to be considered a burden? Time will answer this question, and while waiting, one can hope that time is friendlier to ornamental word play than it was to the King James Bible.
References


**In order to show how to cite an online source, we left this source as a section of a webpage rather than citing the original source--The King James Bible Translators by Olga S. Opfell; Jefferson and London: McFarland, 1982.

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