

**Book Review: Edwin Newman, *Strictly Speaking: Will America Be the Death of English*. Transaction Large Print, 2010.**

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In what amounts to an act of public service, Transaction Publishers continues to publish Edwin Newman's *Strictly Speaking* (1974) in a large print edition. The book is entertaining and instructive in the vein of such classics as George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" and Mark Twain's "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses." Newman ridicules clichés, euphemisms, incorrect usage, pseudo-scientific terminology, and turgid political speech while providing a fascinating introduction to politics in the United States during the seventies.

Newman (1919-2010) was a reporter at NBC from 1961 to 1984. He appears in many television programs available on YouTube, which include his address to a bereaved nation on the day of President Kennedy's assassination, an interview with Marshall McLuhan, a documentary on the 1964 World Fair, and two presidential debates that he moderated. Newman also appeared in a comic sketch on "Saturday Night Live" in which he corrects the grammar of a caller on a suicide prevention hotline.

In *Strictly Speaking*, Newman skewers such time-worn phrases as "whopping wage increases" ("When does a wage increase begin to whop?" he wonders) and "uneasy truce" ("But who ever heard of an easy truce, or a comfortable one?") (27, 30-31). Newman also points out journalistic framing devices: "As automatic as uneasy before truce was

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Marxist before the title of the late President Allende of Chile. You would have thought that Marxist President was the position Allende had run for and been elected to” (32).

Some of the clichés highlighted by Newman (i. e., “eyeball to eyeball confrontation” and “paper tiger”) (35) are mercifully obsolete. He also pillories the professional jargon of newscasters who speak of “major thunderstorm activity” instead of “major thunderstorms” and of psychologists who consider children to be in “a play situation” rather than at play. (30) The vocabulary of the social sciences (“misspecification,” “disaggregates,” etc.) appears to have earned, at least in the mind of Newman, its users a special place in Hell.

Nonetheless, sloppy constructions, such as “partially surrounded” and “totally unique,” may well endure as long as the English language. For Newman, insipid language resembles background elevator music that “that incessantly encroaches on us [and] thumps and tinkles away, mechanical, without color, inflection, vigor, charm, or distinction” unlike the “wisecracks, accurate descriptions, precise formulations of ideas [that] brighten the world” (21). In a sequel, *A Civil Tongue* (1976), he elaborates further:

A civil tongue... means to me a language that is not bogged down in jargon, not puffed up with false dignity, not studded with trick phrases that have lost their meaning. It is not falsely exciting, is not patronizing, does not conceal the smallness and triteness of ideas by clothing them in language ever more grandiose, does not seek out increasingly complicated constructions, does not weigh us down with the gelatinous verbiage of Washington and the social sciences... It is direct, specific, concrete, vigorous, colorful, subtle, and imaginative when it should be, and as lucid and eloquent as we are able to make it. It is something to revel in and enjoy. (6)

In *Strictly Speaking*, Newman relates language to democracy, observing that “those for whom words have lost their value are likely to find that ideas have also lost their value.” (6) However, Newman understands that good language usage has its limits, wondering, for example, whether grammarians were less fooled by the Gulf of Tonkin affair – the fabricated incident that President Johnson used to escalate the war in Vietnam – than were other people (8). Newman identifies several euphemisms to which Vietnam gave rise: “protective reaction strike, surgical bombing, free-fire zone, interdiction, contingency capability, New Life Hamlet,” which, he informs us, “in sterner days was a refugee

camp.” “Incursion” is another infamous euphemism, used to describe the invasion of Laos (79-80).

Indeed, The Vietnam War created language befitting an automaton. Newman accordingly describes Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara: “Clicking and whirring sounds would be heard; he would look uncomfortable; and out would come a readout advocating an electronic fence along the border between the two Vietnams” (68). According to Nick Turse, author of a recent history on Vietnam, McNamara exemplified the mindset of the “thoroughly corporatized, quantitatively oriented system that the sociologist James William Gibson astutely calls ‘technowar’” (41). A more sensitive side of McNamara emerges in the documentary *The Fog of War* in which he expresses something that approaches remorse for his conduct of the war.

Federal officials created barriers to knowledge that led to conflict. Newman recalls that Secretary of State Dean Rusk testily asked reporters, “Which side are you on?” Newman assures us that “they were where they should have been, on the side of accurate reporting” (75). Today such an assurance would be less tenable, thanks to the consolidation of media and the decline of investigative reporting.

Newman notes that the Vietnam War led youth to revolt against authority and convention, especially in language. Although he understands the disillusionment with “people of age and experience,” as he calls them, Newman chastises youthful artistic and musical taste: “I have no wish to impair my hearing by listening to their music, and a communication gap between an electronic rock group and me is something I devotedly cherish and would hate to see disappear” (12).

*Strictly Speaking* introduces us to inane political expression during the seventies. Newman pillories the fatuous use of alliteration by politicians such as Governor Mark Hatfield, who in a speech to the 1960 Republican National Convention praised Richard Nixon for having “demonstrated courage in crisis from Caracas to the Kremlin” (116), as well as Vice President Spiro Agnew, who is lampooned for expressions, dreamt up by White House speech writers, such as “pampered prodigies,” “vicars of vacillation,” and “nattering nabobs of negativism” (1-2).

According to Newman, the Watergate hearings, which led to President Nixon’s resignation in 1974, revealed “a poverty of expression, an inability to say anything in a striking way, an addiction to a language that was almost denatured, and in which what little humor did occur was usually unintentional” (8). Newman understands that clichés and obfuscation reflect the mediocrity and corruption of those in power, pointing out that “in Washington, as we learned from the White House

transcripts, a president may speak of kicking butts, call a problem a can of worms, decide not to be in the position of basically hunkering down, anticipate something hitting the fan” (9).

Newman’s book highlights the importance of good writing to a democracy. It epitomizes journalism in the public interest, the kind that has given rise to such prophetic and dissident voices as Chris Hedges. Notably, a number of renowned American novelists, including Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, Theodore Dreiser, and Sinclair Lewis, were once journalists. *Strictly Speaking* remains a treat to be savored nearly four decades after it was first published.

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## **POSTSCRIPT**

As I completed this review in late August 2013, faculty at my college received an email from librarians listing two thousand books in language and literature slated for removal from the SUNY Canton library. Among the titles is *Strictly Speaking*. A week later, the librarians sent the faculty a list of serials to be eliminated. Among them is *Theory in Action*, the journal in which this book review appears.

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