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‘This We Have Done’: The Vagueness of Poetry and Public Relations

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Introduction

This chapter compares VL in two very different discourses: poetry and public relations. To do this, it considers each one in broad terms, analysing both changing critical approaches to meaning in literary discourse in general, and the growing power and prominence of public relations. But to anchor this general discussion, it also homes in on a particular example, statements beginning with the structure ‘FIRST PERSON PRONOUN + have + PAST PARTICIPLE’, first in the Bob Dylan song *A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall* (which I treat as a poem) and second in a corpus of public-relations web pages by the world’s largest food and tobacco companies. There is nothing inherently vague about this structure in itself. Indeed I have chosen it because of its apparent definiteness of reference to what has happened in the past. But its use in my two sources produces vague meanings, though with very different likely effects. The aim is to explore how and why this is, and its significance for the understanding and study of language use in the contemporary world.

Before turning to the quality of being ‘vague’ in poetry and public relations, however, it may be well (in order to rescue the concept itself from vagueness) to define this quality with reference to an antonym: being ‘precise’. If we can define what we mean when we say that meaning is ‘precise’, then we may be able to say that vagueness is the absence of that quality. To this purpose, and to provide a yardstick against which to measure poetic and public-relations discourse when we come to them, I begin by considering a very different kind of language use: emergency procedures.
Emergency procedures

Emergency procedures are instructions about what to do in a crisis such as a fire, an emergency landing, the evacuation of a building, or someone suffering a heart attack, arterial bleeding and such (Lobianco 1999). Their aim is presumably to use language as precisely as possible. But what precisely do we mean by 'precise' in this context?

According to the much maligned conduit metaphor of communication (Reddy 1979), linguistic communication is a means of conducting thoughts and ideas from one mind into another, just as a conduit conducts water between locations. The current vogue is to dismiss this metaphor, as Reddy did, for its failure to take account of the active role of the receiver in constructing an interpretation of a message (for example Thorne 2000). Nevertheless, it remains true that the transmission of information is part of communication, sought after and substantially achieved, albeit only partially, and in some genres more than others. Consider for example the following emergency procedure, presented as typical by Lobianco (op. cit.) in her analysis of a corpus of 125 such texts.¹ This particular one is about what to do if somebody chokes.

Abdominal thrusts

NEVER use this on babies.

1. Stand or kneel behind the person. Put your arms around their abdomen.
2. Make a fist with one hand and grasp it with the other hand. Pull both hands towards you with a quick inward and upward thrust from the elbows to squeeze the upper abdomen. Pull hard enough to push the air out and dislodge the obstruction.
3. Repeat up to five times.

Here it seems reasonable to suppose that the main intention was to convey information known to the writer but not to all readers. Of course this simple characterization of the text is subject to many qualifications. Some of its linguistic choices may fail to achieve this objective, thus leading to an unintended vagueness. The second sentence of point 2 is a case in point, being linguistically and semantically complex and difficult to process. Technical terms such as 'upper abdomen' (though precise for those with medical training) and formal phrasing such as 'dislodge the obstruction' puzzled some of the readers in Lobianco’s study, and may well have been motivated at least in part by a desire to impress and establish