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WIMP ENGLISH

With the contemporary shift away from traditional work requiring brawn to the epicene service economy relying on brain power, dexterity, and "good customer relations," we observe a concomitant change in speech patterns whereby directness and plainspokenness are regularly avoided in favor of indirection and blandness. These patterns are especially typical of public pronouncements and the speech of persons who must take care to be as neutral or noncommittal as possible.

We propose the designation WIMP ENGLISH for such speech. In this note, we would like to call attention to some features of Wimp English as a variety of American English, particularly the widespread use of the phrase *if you will* as a kind of self-glossing anodyne employed to attenuate or neutralize the force of words. We hope that this will spur other miscellaniasts to widen the discussion by contributing further examples.

Despite the fact that elementary handbooks of forceful writing routinely warn against the use of the passive instead of the active voice, it is one of the most entrenched means by which blandness is achieved. The passive necessarily means a diminution in force because agents are always grammatically less central than subjects, quite apart from changes in syntax (cf. *Miss Smith paid attention* vs. *Attention was paid by Miss Smith*). But there are many other grammatical means of achieving toothlessness, three of which we would like to discuss.

The first is the use of the modal *would* after the first-person singular pronoun with verbs such as *hope*, *think*, *imagine*. The combination—*I would hope*—is so commonplace that one tends to forget its peculiarly blunted character: *I would hope that Jane would pay her debts* is far more circumspect

than *I hope that Jane pays her debts*. Politicians, managers, bureaucrats, and flak-catchers of all stripes, including academics, are often heard uttering such locutions. In an interview with the director Brian De Palma concerning the film version of Tom Wolfe's novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, De Palma is quoted as saying, "The book caused a tremendous furor when it came out. I would hope that the film would have [*sic*] the same furor" (*New York Times*, 16 Dec. 1990, 42). The effect of the *would* here is to distance the speaker from *hope*: he is afraid not only to hope that the film will have the same success as the book but even to allow himself the hope. The catachresis of the verb *have* with respect to *furor* (signaled by our *sic*) only underscores the pusillanimity. This is linguistic wimpishness par excellence.

The second feature of Wimp English is the use of the participle or deverbal adjective, particularly *-ive*, plus *of*, instead of the verb: *They were admiring of her coiffure*, *We are very supportive of his initiative* (Hamp 1988); *This trait is indicative of a certain mentality*, *They are desirous of the public's approval*. The adjectives, being stative, are necessarily attenuated vis-à-vis the finite verbs which they are correlated with (or derived from) because as nominalized verbs they lack the main property of a transitive verb, its transitivity, specifically its ability to govern the DIRECT object.

Nominalization also entails the further consequence that the sentence will be longer, often leading to convolutions, hence a further attenuation of semantic directness. Another likelihood is that a sentence built on an adjectival construction like *is indicative of* will be a simple (subject-predicate) sentence, although possibly "swollen by parentheses and modifiers" (Wells 1960, 216). The combination of parataxis and extended length have the effect of deflecting semantic force.

Finally, and most intriguingly, we would like to comment on a feature of Wimp English that is relatively new. On 27 July 1990, one of us was sitting in the Manhattan office of the American Automobile Association when he overheard a woman say to an agent, "My dilemma, if you will, is that. . . ." Now, judging from the context, *dilemma* was being used in a perfectly straightforward way: the woman had only a limited amount of time in which to visit two destinations and had to make a choice. The use of a somewhat bookish word apparently made the speaker append the tag *if you will*, AS IF THE WORD'S USE NEEDED TO BE SANCTIONED BY THE HEARER. The W3 gloss for the phrase is 'if you wish to call it that'. In Wimp English, however, the gloss has changed to 'if I may be allowed to call it that'. This interpretation is confirmed, for instance, by the example of its use by a cardiologist talking to some colleagues about the feasibility of a heart bypass operation while they jointly examine an angiogram: "This arterial blockage, if you will, could cause problems down the line" (*Borderline Medicine*, PBS-TV, WNET, New York, 17 Dec. 1990). In our opinion, *if you will* is a much more

widespread locution than *so to speak* and has peculiar semantic force, hence our concentration on it to the exclusion of the latter.

The change in the meaning of *if you will* becomes obvious when one analyzes the frequent use of the phrase after tropes. Recently, we heard a guest (a government official) on a Sunday morning talk show append *if you will* to the phrase *walk on eggs*. Persons in the public eye are now habitually loath to utter something figurative for fear of departing from literal expression, as if a trope were a complication to be shunned, in the same way that anything verbally out of the ordinary is to be avoided. In some speakers that we have observed, the incidence of *if you will* has reached that of a verbal tic, akin to *you know* or *like*.

This is an example of Wimp English for the most fundamental reason. Any resort to tropological expression does something that literalness always avoids: it necessarily foregrounds the creativity involved in troping, the element of choice inherent in saying something figuratively rather than literally. The converse is not true. More importantly, the element of choice always highlights the subjectivity of the form of the utterance, hence of the SPEAKING SUBJECT. What Wimp English wants to avoid at all costs, however, is just this kind of concentration on the speaking subject.

An interesting control on this analysis is the use of buzzwords or phaseological clichés. In Wimp English, these typically require no excuse, hence no *if you will* is heard after phrases like *down the pike* and *the ball's in their/his/her/your court*. There is a sense of linguistic safety in using such locutions because of the (current) absence of unusualness. Sports metaphors may be complicated or indecipherable to someone lacking the appropriate knowledge of terminology, but the language of sports is an approved, even a correct, means of semantic transference in ordinary American speech which sustains an impersonal tenor while promoting bonding. As long as the utterer does not deem the linguistic material unusual, no prophylactic tag need be appended.

What accounts for the prevalence of Wimp English? The avoidance of individual responsibility and above all the need to be risk free. Wimp English has found a home in advertising with the advent of consumer protection from exaggerated truth claims ("will not stick to MOST dental work," "good for MINOR aches and pains"). But television is not any more to blame than the need to appease interest groups, governmental flip-flops, and national economic insecurity. What lies at the heart of Wimp English, we believe, is a failure of thought.

Thought is always discriminatory, in the primary sense of the word: it make distinctions. What binds together discourse strategies such as distancing by contrary-to-fact (*I would hope*), defanging by adjectivization (*is appreciative of*), and concessive glossing by immediate demurrer (*if you will*) is

that they all seek to obliterate potential conflicts, oppositions, or even differences.

At bottom, Wimp English is, in our view, a special manifestation of the strong tendency in American culture to level hierarchies. Grammatically, this tendency manifests itself in the preference for parataxis (coordination, comparison) over hypotaxis (subordination, differentiation), as in the currently ubiquitous but nonnormative use of *than* instead of *from* after *different* (Shapiro 1988, 127–29). Nothing in grammar is more basic than the (asymmetric) rank relations between *I* and *thou*, between the speaking subject and the listener. Wimp English, in all of its manifestations, strives to subvert this hierarchization by insinuating a solidarity between Ego and Other which, in the final analysis, substitutes feeling for thought and submerges the referential in the phatic.

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A COMPLETE LIST OF HOMOGRAPHS FROM THE OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY

Homographs—words such as *wind*, *bow*, and *record*—have two or more accepted pronunciations (in a given dialect), each with a different meaning. Such words can be notoriously challenging for any computer text-reading system: how is the computer to know which is the proper pronunciation? To disambiguate such words requires methods beyond mere orthographic and phonological analysis, for instance ones based on frequency, lexical, or semantic information. As such, the existence of homographs precludes the complete success of computer systems such as NETalk, one recent connectionist ("neural network") approach to text reading based solely on orthography (see Sejnowski and Rosenberg 1987). For similar reasons homographs can also present a special challenge to learners of a foreign language as well as to sight-readers such as newscasters. Homographs also