

historical reflections on the language of political science in america and europe

doi: 10.1057/eps.2013.40; published online 20 December 2013

The value of the digital revolution, they tell us, is that nothing will ever be lost again – it is all there (somewhere) and retrievable. If so, then the only drawback is that, since nothing will be lost, then nothing need ever be ‘found’ again – thus robbing us of the joy of coming across something we remember but can’t find, or do not even remember as having existed. The article that follows by Hans Daalder is one such example – found languishing in a drawer fifty years after it was written and never having been published or seen the light of day, apart from a brief outing at a conference. And what

should a political scientist do with such a discovered text? Why, submit it to *EPS*, of course, since the journal’s mission is to encourage debate about the discipline, contemporary or historic. To provide Daalder’s piece with a broader context we asked Richard Rose to write a few of his own historical reflections on that period, especially since he lived and worked on both sides of the Atlantic. The difference, however, should be emphasized: one is an article written then but published now; the other is written now but is about then...

The Editors

the plethora of polysyllables: a behavioural approach to the frequent use of jargon in american political science

hans daalder

Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands

E-mail: h.daalder@umail.leidenuniv.nl

doi: 10.1057/eps.2013.40

Abstract

This 'behaviouralist' satire written in 1961 in Berkeley (California) sought to 'account' for the widespread use of unnecessary jargon in political science through five propositions: the prestige of (natural) sciences in Academia; the increasing scale of political science which fragments the discipline into ever more specialized publics; the lure of interdisciplinarity; the magic of methodology; and the impact of the writings of expatriate German social scientists coming to the USA in the 1930s.

Keywords scale; professionalization; interdisciplinarity; specialized publics; career incentives

When organizing files from a long life in political science, which are to be transferred to the Leiden University Library, I came across a satirical paper written when I was a post-doctoral Rockefeller fellow at Harvard and Berkeley in 1960–1961. I remember drafting the paper in a small office at the top of the Berkeley Library, after reading a particularly obtuse paper by an equally young, but already somewhat famous American scholar on development studies. During a transatlantic crossing back to Europe in August 1961 I met Austin Ranney, on his way to Paris as rapporteur for a panel on behavioural studies to be held at the triennial IPSA Congress. He invited me on the spot to

present my paper in one of his sessions. Somewhat rashly, I agreed to do so.

I have reason to remember that meeting. After me Karl W. Deutsch presented his seminal paper on 'Social Mobilization in Political Development' (published subsequently in the September 1961 issue of the *American Political Science Review*). He had brought a large number of copies with him, which he afterwards distributed freely to eager participants. I joined the queue. When it was my turn, Deutsch pointed a finger at me, speaking the memorable words: 'I won't give you a copy, you are an enemy of American political science!'

During my year in the States, I became immersed in the vast, varied and creative

American scholarship which influenced me profoundly. I became involved in a series of joint ventures in the following years with leading American and European scholars in comparative politics, eventually including Deutsch. Apparently he was willing to forgive me for my early sins, as he let us live in his house in Cambridge when I occupied a Harvard Chair in 1989–1990. To find this paper again, lost in a drawer for more than a half a century, was a special experience indeed.

THE 1961 TEXT

A fair amount of recent political science writing in the United States is rapidly becoming unintelligible except to the initiated. It is not proposed to discuss here whether this points to a desirable sophistication of the subject, to a passing intoxication, or possibly to both. In the hands of some authors, such as D.B. Truman, R.A. Dahl, H. Lasswell, and others, special terms have clearly contributed to exact thought. In the hands of lesser men, these terms have turned into mere verbiage. Nor is it the intention to put forward a doctrine of original American sin. There are as many Americans as Europeans who resist the trend, and the phenomenon is not unknown in Europe. Jargon is, moreover, a surface phenomenon. It may complicate communication and cloud the pleasure of reading academic prose. But it does not fundamentally detract from the richness and inventiveness of American scholarship, which Europeans should envy and emulate, rather than disparage. Even so, polysyllabelitis is, for the time being, undoubtedly spread more widely in the United States than elsewhere. The following five propositions seek to explain why. According to one's taste, these might be regarded as 'impressionistic notes', or as 'suggestive hypotheses', to be verified in later research. It should be understood, however, that the systematic testing of

'... polysyllabelitis is, for the time being, undoubtedly spread more widely in the United States than elsewhere'.

these hypotheses is not to be carried out by this writer. There is, to use the stock phrase, ample scope for theoretical and empirical work of other scholars in this field.

PROPOSITION I: THE SEDUCTION OF SCIENCE

The liberal use of technical terms, it is suggested, is a direct result of the great prestige which the natural sciences carry everywhere in the United States. Cultural historians and other such non-U writers¹, have sought to account for the great influence of the natural sciences in scholarly tomes. A behaviourally inclined writer, such as the present one, may satisfy himself with the more direct method of content analysis. Even a casual look at a number of American professional journals shows the awe in which 'science' is held in many quarters of Academia. The natural sciences attract as the beacon of promise. If only the social sciences, too, would become really 'scientific', they might also obtain the weight which other disciplines now have. And, even more alluring to some, social scientists could then claim a position of direction and control of society, much as engineers now direct rockets and control nuclear energy.

It is not our concern here to discuss whether the 'science' concept of the professed social scientists has much relevance to present developments in the natural sciences. (This is, to say the least, doubtful). Whether true or not, the scientific analogy affects the use of a special language in three ways. Science is thought to require, in the first place,

unambiguous concepts. Only exact definitions can guarantee clarity of thought. Moreover, ever finer distinctions will have to be made if one is to arrive at the most basic, least divisible elements on which scientific theories can be built. The symbolic language of mathematics is the ultimate ideal, toward which our social sciences move regrettably slowly. Thus Goethe's famous phrase: 'Where understanding lacks, a word readily takes its place', is inverted. It now reads: 'Where (new) words lack, understanding can never take their place'. A second effect of scientism is the belief in accumulation. Just as the sciences, social studies, it is argued, can only progress in a cumulative way if they form theories which are constantly tested and refined by further research. Theories demand exact formulations, Research requires unambiguous research designs. Team work (whether simultaneous or through time) is only fruitful if all speak the same specialised language.

A third consequence of scientism is the growth of an ideology of professionalism. Not only science, but scientists need a special vocabulary. As long as everyday words are used, full of subjective overtones, the uninitiated may get the mistaken impression that common sense might be a substitute for scientific expertise. A special aseptic language allows the expert few to turn the ignorant multitude away. After all, to invert a metaphor of Charles Poore, it is the task of social science to be scientific, not sociable.

PROPOSITION II: THE SCALE OF THE PROFESSION

Political science in the USA is a gigantic enterprise. Political science departments are numbered in hundreds, political scientists in thousands. This makes the intellectual output of the American profession massive. It is, moreover, increased further by the pressure to publish which

'A special aseptic language allows the expert few to turn the ignorant multitude away'.

rests on many a young academic in his search for tenure and promotion. As Robert W. Tuft said in a graduation address at Antioch College: 'One suspects indeed that the purpose of the press is more to impress one's colleagues than to express one's findings. The law of publish-or-perish has led to a kind of academic Darwinism, or survival of the wordiest. When one is asked these days what one is working on, it is taken for granted by both questioner and questioned that the words 'working on' refer to writing. It would be almost unthinkable to reply that one is reading'.² Mass production of academic work need not necessarily make for difficult words. But there are certain indirect links between the two phenomena. There is, in the first place, a tendency in some institutions to measure output by quantity rather than quality. This leads many eager publicists to write up the same material in different ways. New words easily suggest new thought. (Even when this is not the case, it takes more energy to dispel this assumption than in the case of treatises written in ordinary English – a major advantage where the intention behind publication is not to be read, but to be printed).

In the second place, the urge for publication has made the critical review of other people's writings a popular exercise. This easily shows 'erudition' and 'superior wisdom'. It readily leads to the formulation of new hypotheses, to suggestions for new research, and to new terms and concepts. In the third place, strong competition puts a premium on the diversification of product, in academic life as much as in economic life. Some status-seeking universities try to develop their own special

'line' of intellectual 'goods'. Similarly, many individuals deliberately cultivate hyper-specialised fields. There is, moreover, a ready connection between specialisation at the university level and specialisation at the individual level. Younger men in the larger universities naturally start from the over-specialised basis of their limited teaching assignments. They have a tendency to discount the judgment of senior colleagues, who are in a position to give or withhold promotion. These are *passé*, unable to relish the intellectual gems they are offered. Of course, they are handed a reprint, but the intended public is elsewhere. It is to be found in other universities 'where the really exciting work goes on', or in the Foundations or Committees of the Social Science Research Council, which control the research grants. Much time is thus spent in communication with like-minded individuals elsewhere, to be up on the latest developments, and to admire or criticise each other's work. Factors of scale, in other words, create special publications and special publics. A secret language easily flourishes in this rarified atmosphere.

PROPOSITION III: THE ITCH OF INTERDISCIPLINARITY

Interdisciplinary work is fashionable in the United States. This, to a small extent, is a result of organizational factors. The departmental organization of the larger American universities has inevitably led to boundary transgressions. The bright young men, in conflict with their seniors, have often sought moral support from experts in rival fields, who readily agreed to their opinion that political science is 'old fashioned'. Fear that departments of sociology, psychology, or economics might annex territories from the preserve of political science has led to counter-movements. Departments of political science have preferred to appoint their own experts in

political behaviour, in political psychology, in organization theory, etc., reasoning that these fields could be controlled more easily from within. This heightened the fragmentation of the discipline and enhanced the tendency to a Babel of tongues.

But the movement towards interdisciplinary cooperation obviously has more important roots. New fields of study have emerged, which traditional political science could neither neglect nor monopolise. Subjects such as totalitarianism, the turmoil of new states, interest groups, voting behaviour, and others were legitimate fields of inquiry for many disciplines. Ever since Charles Merriam published his *New Aspects of Politics* (1925), political scientists have readily joined the trek to the promised interdisciplinary land. Merriam's pupil, Harold Lasswell, pioneered the way, as well as the new lingo of Lasswellese. The Foundations, liking the package deal, have generally promoted the new trend. Through its contact with other disciplines, words and theories, fads and insights of these fields have rapidly poured into the seemingly barren soil of political science. If this was bewildering to some, others cheered the new dawn. Even though a promising political scientist might turn into little more than a poor sociologist, he could at least impress his less progressive colleagues with his superior knowledge of other fields. The less fortunate might sometimes be shamed into a late acceptance of the draft. Though they might be too old to digest the theories, they could at least pick up some of the jargon.

PROPOSITION IV: THE MAGIC OF METHODOLOGY

The strong concern about methodology in America is directly related to the three foregoing factors. The urge to prove that political science is, or can be, a science takes as much time as the new scientific

work itself. The very specialisation of the discipline leads to attempts to redefine 'the scope and method' of the field. And new interdisciplinary developments have to be embedded in the theories of yesterday. But methodology seems to thrive on its own. It does not require strenuous research. It creates few enemies. It gives one the prestige of a theorist. It has the psychological advantage of being able to damn all predecessors and to figure as the founding father of the future. And it is even of use to the humble research worker. It allows the latter to precede and conclude his empirical work with some resounding references to major theoretical and methodological work. This makes work 'scientific' which otherwise would have been merely – forgive the ugly word – descriptive. The prevalence of methodology, then, has powerfully contributed to the use of new words. It has posited the demand for a complete restructuring of the terminology of political science so as to make it truly scientific, logically consistent, and in step with developments in the other sciences.

PROPOSITION V: THE CONTINENTAL INVASION

A final factor is of foreign, rather than of American, origin. The love of difficult

'The love of difficult words used to be a peculiarly Teutonic prerogative'.

words used to be a peculiarly Teutonic prerogative. Since then, these words have migrated from Germany to the United States, in two ways. One was the belated discovery by American political scientists of universal theorists such as Max Weber. Weber's intricate writings were translated by Talcott Parsons, and ever after Parsonianism became the hallmark of methodological sophistication.³ The second factor is more practical. It is the effect of the massive emigration of German scholars to the United States in the 1930s. There they were forced to render their contributions in a foreign tongue. Some stood up magnificently to the task. But others had a more difficult time. As the late Jan Barents once said, at the IPSA Congress in Rome (1958). 'They took their difficult words with them, translated them into bad Latin or Greek, transposed them into worse English, and sat down to let the natives marvel'. If true, this abrogates some of the force of our first hypothesis: it made the classics as guilty as the sciences for the new language of 'pseudisch' or 'sozial-scientisch'.

Notes

1 In the 1950s Nancy Mitford popularized the distinction of U- (Upper Class) and non-U (not Upper Class) English; see article in *The Independent* (1994).

2 This speech was printed in the *Congressional Record* of 24 May 1961, A 3700–3701. Surprisingly, there are still some slack individuals who refuse to fight and who are happy where they are. But they produce less, as is convincingly demonstrated in an undoubted U-journal, by Gouldner (1957–1958)

3 There is an irreverent attempt at translation of Parsonian into English in Mills (1959: 25–37)

References

- Gouldner, A.W. (1957-1958) Cosmopolitans and locals, *Administrative Science Quarterly* II: 281–306, and 444–480.
 Merriam, C. (1925) *New Aspects of Politics*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mills, C.W. (1959) *The Sociological Imagination*, Oxford: University Press.
The Independent. (1994) 5 June. <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/a-u-and-nonu-exchange-in-1956-alan-ross-defined-the-language-that-marked-a-man-above-or-below-stairs-today-can-one-still-tell-1420569.html>, accessed 18 August 2013.

About the Author

Hans Daalder (1928) was Professor of Political Science at Leiden University (1963–1993). He was one of the eight founders of the European Consortium of Political Research in 1970, and served as the first Head of the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the European University Institute in Florence (1976–1979). He edited a volume of 27 intellectual (auto-)biographies of a generation of comparative politics scholars, carrying the somewhat misleading title *Comparative European Politics: The Story of a Profession* (London: Frances Pinter, 1997) insisted upon by the publisher who was afraid that the book might otherwise land on a general biographies shelf instead of the one on politics and political science. The ECPR Press published a volume of his writings entitled *State Formation, Parties and Democracy. Studies in Comparative European Politics* in its Classics in Political Science series (2011). That book has a challenging preface by the late Peter Mair, concluding that contemporary political science journals would not now publish such papers. Since his retirement Hans Daalder has worked mainly on a multi-volume political biography of Willem Drees (1896–1988) who was Prime Minister of the Netherlands in the critical post-World War II period from 1948 to 1958.

do words have meanings?

richard rose

University of Strathclyde, 16 Richmond St, Glasgow G1 1XQ, UK

E-mail: prof_r_rose@yahoo.co.uk

doi: 10.1057/eps.2013.40

Abstract

My initial studies in comparative literature trained me to focus on words that are metaphors that symbolize a larger meaning; social science concepts should have the same purpose. My study of architectural history taught me that technical terms can have a precise meaning distinguishing Gothic from Renaissance buildings. Exposure to positivism at Oxford put me on guard against jargon words that have no specifiable denotation. Exposure to Wittgenstein made me appreciate both the strengths and traps of words heavy with connotations. In reaction against the brute empiricism of Oxford politics discourse, I searched for ideas in lodes of American political science. Once the great mass of dross was discarded, there remained enough conceptual gold to produce an un-English book on politics in England that remains in print a half century on.

In 1961 both Hans Daalder and I were puzzling over books in German-American, the language of American political science. The tone of his comments matched what was said to me in Oxford and at the LSE. When I went for a

job interview at the LSE and proudly mentioned that I had been invited to give a paper at a seminar on political sociology being organised by Stein Rokkan, Professor W.A. Robson commented, 'One of the most boring people I have ever met'.

However, our responses were not the same. As a Dutchman, Hans had developed an excellent command of English to study British politics, whereas I was raised on the American language and studied comparative literature and drama as my first degree. To argue whether Arthur Miller's 'Death of a Salesman' could be a tragedy, one had to grapple with the conceptual meaning of tragedy as defined by Aristotle. To follow James Bryce's dictum of concentrating on the facts of Willie Loman's life would have missed the whole point of the play and to describe the narrator in Proust's magnum opus as a garrulous insomniac would have been a misreading of his novel.

From lectures on aesthetics I learned the significance of metaphor, that is, that important words are signs or symbols pointing toward a larger meaning. I also learned the importance of technical vocabulary by studying the history of architecture. Words such as clerestory and pilaster are not in everyday use in English or American, yet they are not meaningless jargon. They have very specific meanings useful in distinguishing Gothic from Renaissance buildings.

In the Oxford school of Politics, Philosophy and Economics, the philosophers took the meaning of words very seriously. Positivists emphasized clarity and the stipulation of a meaning for each word, so that it could clearly signify what was being described. By contrast, followers of Wittgenstein emphasized that a word could have a family of meanings living happily or unhappily together. Everyday discourse involved the indirect or implicit invocation of meaning, the Mandarin language of civil servants familiar today through episodes of 'Yes, Minister'.

'My doctoral supervisor knew languages in four different alphabets but had no interest in comparison'.

Although writers about politics in England such as Bryce and A.L. Lowell wrote informative books about multiple countries, they had no interest in concepts. Each provided useful descriptions of countries in ideographic and particularistic language. Bob McKenzie's *British Political Parties* was exceptional in drawing on theories of Schumpeter and Michels to examine a British subject. But then Bob was a Canadian and he'd had a proper sociological education before settling in England. My Oxford DPhil thesis 'The Relation of Socialist Principles to British Labour Foreign Policy, 1945–1951' combined an abstract principle with an intensive analysis of how conflicts between Clement Attlee's government and left-wing Labour MPs were managed. The Warden of Nuffield thought it was not necessary to bother with ideas; all that was needed was to describe what happened. I stuck to my guns and came up with an explanation that was sufficiently robust to fit the conflicts that have haunted subsequent Labour Party leaders who delivered less to satisfy their core constituency than the 1945–1951 Labour government did.

Since I was looking for a job on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as reading classics in English, I took out a subscription to the *American Political Science Review* in 1958 and studied on my own books such as the German-American reader, *Political Behavior*, edited by Eulau, Eldersveld and Janowitz. My doctoral supervisor knew languages in four different alphabets but had no interest in comparison. When I asked him what he thought of Gabriel Almond's newly

published framework for the comparative analysis of *The Politics of Developing Areas*, the look on his face said it all.

The Government Department at Manchester, to which I moved in 1961, was very different. The head, W.J.M. Mackenzie, was a classical philologist accustomed to puzzling over the meaning of words, and had started reading the *APSR* in the early 1930s. There was a preference for the straightforward language of Herbert Simon rather than that of Talcott Parsons, whose writings reflected his Heidelberg doctorate, but a great openness to the careful consideration of generic concepts. This approach was also the norm for the newly formed Committee on Political Sociology headed by Marty Lipset and Stein Rokkan, which I was fortunate to join when it held its first conference in Bergen in 1961.

When asked whether I would like to contribute a book on England to a new series of country studies in comparative politics led by Gabriel Almond, my response was pragmatic. To see whether his abstract framework added value, I first outlined the chapters of the paperback book that I had been thinking about writing. It was much like that of the Penguin paperback, *Voters, Parties and Leaders*, that, unknown to me, Jean Blondel (1963) was writing. The second outline applied the Almond framework to politics in England. The chapter headings were concepts that could be linked in a generic conceptual framework, thus making comparison with other countries possible. To my slight surprise, the Almond framework was better.

When I circulated the first draft of my conceptually oriented study of politics in England, W.J.M. Mackenzie commented that he never thought he would read a manuscript that was written in a mixture of English, American and German-American. He advised, 'For God's sake, choose one language and stick to it'. David Butler's comment reflected the Oxford and LSE

'The working language of political science in Europe has become EFL (English as a Foreign Language).'

view: make it clear to the reader that I was not English. I wrote the manuscript initially in American and then made marginal changes to translate it into English. Much that I have written since has relied on conventional English-language vocabulary, albeit with more attention to the connotations of words, and deepened by the use of social science concepts and reasoning. This has given it a breadth and generality beyond the immediate focus on Northern Ireland or a single incumbent of the White House or Downing Street.

The development of political science in the past half century has vindicated the decision to take the American study of politics seriously. *Politics in England*, first published in 1964, became the prototype in the Little, Brown series of books on comparative politics. It will come out in a new and abridged edition in 2014 as one part of *Comparative Politics Today*, edited by Bingham Powell, Russ Dalton and Kaare Strom, and now in its eleventh edition. This text combines nine chapters expanding the original Almond comparative framework and twelve chapters examining countries on six continents following the pattern that my book established half a century ago.

Since most participants in the activities of ECPR and of EU-funded team research are not native English or American-speakers, the working language of political science in Europe has become EFL (English as a Foreign Language). It is also the language of a growing number of younger academics who are increasingly prominent in British universities, including Oxford and the LSE as well as Strathclyde. Articles written in EFL tend to

include relevant descriptive information and care in the use of words as concepts. If I were to rewrite Hans's critique today, the theme would be the mistaken tendency to treat computer mnemonics and quantitative coefficients as sufficient to understand politics. The one thing we would certainly agree upon is that the

study of politics has changed a lot since 1961, and changed for the better.

A much fuller discussion of the transformation of political science in Europe can be found in Richard Rose's memoir, Learning about Politics in Time and Space, to be published by the ECPR Press in early 2014.

References

- Blondel, J. (1963) *Voters, Parties and Leaders*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin.
- Eulau, H., Eldersveld, S.J. and M., Janowitz (eds.) (1958) *Political Behavior*, Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.
- Powell, G.B., Dalton, R. and Strom, K. (eds.) (2014) *Comparative Politics Today: A World View*, 11th edn. New York: Longman.
- Rose, R. (1964) *Politics in England*, 1st edn. Boston: Little, Brown.

About the Author

Richard Rose is Professor of Politics and Director of the Centre for the Study of Public Policy, which he founded at the University of Strathclyde Glasgow in 1976. He is also a co-founder of the European Consortium for Political Research. Over many years Rose has used concepts to place case studies of countries as diverse as the United States, Northern Ireland and Russia in a comparative context, as well as undertaking systematic comparative research across the OECD world. His latest book is *Representing Europeans: A Pragmatic Approach* (Oxford University Press, 2013).