

The Last Word

Freedom of Speech

Carol Matthews

It seems to me that people these days have altogether too much freedom of speech. Words, whenever we employ them, are tossed about without much regard for their meaning. Prepositions are used, if at all, loosely, in inappropriate ways: “I’m bored of this book... I should of paid attention... Your car is different than mine... They showed up to the theatre,” etc.

Most often people speak in hyperbole of awesome restaurants, amazing journeys. Slushy, feel-good words. Phrases like “It’s a journey” and “I want to honour your experience” supplant precise language. Pictures are replacing words, and verbs are disappearing. We rely on simple captions to convey messages. Nowadays, we are provided with videos to augment written instructions.

These days, words fail us. Or do we fail them? Perhaps we need to ask some questions. For instance, does the language matter? Does poetry have anything to teach us? Words have always been my greatest solace. I am moved by sentences that precisely describe a perception such as Anthony Doerr’s *Beneath your world of skies and faces and buildings exists a rawer and older world, a place where surface planes disintegrate and sounds ribbon in shoals through the air*. Just the phrase “sounds ribbon in shoals” is a thrill to me. Even a single word – PK Page’s choice of the word *catafalque* in her phrase *the tall eventual catafalque* – can bring me delight. (A *catafalque* is a decorated wooden framework that supports the coffin of a distinguished person at a funeral or while lying in state – something I didn’t know until PK’s poem caused me to look it up.)

Learning new words – or old ones which have been out of use – can be a delight. If we read Robert MacFarlane we learn that a “ghillie” is the person who acts as a guide on a fishing or shooting expedition and that a “pugmark” is the footprint of an animal. He also tells us that the appropriate collective noun for skylarks is “an exultation” and for lapwings is “a deceit”!

Almost every day on Twitter, Haggard Hawks introduces us to wonderfully useful new words like “maunder,” which means to walk or wander in a thoughtful mood, “proditomania,” which is the irrational feeling that everyone around you is a traitor, and “iarmhairsicht” which means the loneliness felt at dawn.

Could we ever communicate such things through emoticons, acronyms, numerals and verbal grunts?

Sometimes, though, there are no words to capture our feelings. We fall silent, which is also important: *Silence is deep as Eternity*, Thomas Carlyle said, *speech is shallow as Time*. Silence is the other side of a love of language, and it too can speak to us.

But when we do speak, let us try to speak well. “Use your words!” we used to say to our children when they had temper tantrums which caused them to shriek or sob.

Speech is how we communicate, connect and collaborate. It may be free but it is also precious and must be treated with care and respect. •

Carol Matthews short stories and reviews have appeared in literary journals such as *Room*, *The New Quarterly*, *Grain*, *Prism*, *Malahat* and *Event*. She has published a collection of short stories and four books of non-fiction.