

Review: Learn to Write Badly: How to Succeed in the Social Sciences

By Michael Billig

Cambridge University Press, 2013

Bad writing prospers in the humanities and social sciences, so we are spoilt for examples. In one famous case, Martha Nussbaum rounded on Judith Butler for her obscurity, arguing it was an insidious form of stylistic collaboration with the power structures targeted by her writings. Nussbaum's review, 'The Professor of Parody,' raised the profile of a sentence already legendary as a result of Butler winning the Bad Writing Contest held by the journal *Philosophy and Literature*. Loosing a sentence from its contextual mooring is always risky, but this millefeuille of complexity is hard to swallow:

The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power.

Nussbaum rewrote this sentence:

Marxist accounts, focusing on capital as the central force structuring social relations, depicted the operations of that force as everywhere uniform. By contrast, Althusserian accounts, focusing on power, see the operations of that force as variegated and as shifting over time.

Not all unscrupulous sentences are this sexy. Michael Billig's book on bad academic writing in the social sciences features many banal cases, the kind of writing that circulates on email mailing lists, conference call-for-papers, and article abstracts. Here is one:

Recognising the potential that this approach offers for accessing the different

layers and dimensions of a complex and constructed social reality brings with it both curiosity and questions about its ontology, epistemological tenets, theoretical frameworks, and practical applications.

I will forgo an extended retinue of such examples since bad sentences are often lengthy (Butler's behemoth ran to ninety-four words). But single words and phrases can bear signs of academic malpractice. "Autocondimentation" is my favorite example from *Learn to Write Badly*. Suddenly, the application of ketchup is reified into a process worthy of grants and articles, or a little lunchtime research.

Seemingly anyone can write this poorly with the practice facilitated by most Bachelors degrees. Here is my attempt at a snappy summary of the main themes of Billig's work:

This book instigates a reversal of nominalization and de-agentalization in the social sciences, in an attempt to re-instill the neglected subject lost in contemporary academic governmentality.

Actually, the book does nothing of the sort. Michael Billig is the only agent here. He sets out a series of arguments to challenge the way that a lot of contemporary social scientists write. Billig has not written a book about academic style. Nor does he make aesthetic arguments, although he is clear that much writing in the social sciences is stilted and ugly. Instead, *Learn to Write Badly* is Billig's attempt to explore the relationship between certain linguistic trends and good social science. At root, Billig's conclusion is that bad writing, often disguised behind a veneer of sophistication and technicality, generates bad academic research.

How are we to understand this claim? Surely the people who need to understand research in the social sciences are the researchers themselves, and since they write in this way they must comprehend the results. It may be inconvenient to have to translate their findings into more popular media, but that is what journalists are for, isn't it? Billig would deny this. The majority of his book examines the relationship between bad writing and bad research.

Billig's primary concerns are that social scientists are keen to create and disseminate nouns and noun phrases instead of active verbs, and that they overuse the passive voice. Butler's laboratory specimen of a sentence clearly manifests these features. Billig charts the development of the first tendency, noting that, "noun phrases, comprising solely nouns, represent one of the most important linguistic developments in modern

English and that they are prominent in academic writing” and that apparently, since 1961, there has been “an increase of roughly 200 per cent in the use of acronyms” in English academic writing.

These tendencies should concern us for several reasons. First, they reify processes and other conceptual items to the status of things with independent theoretical significance. Second, they leave our writing depopulated; human agents vanish. Many of Billig’s case studies, from the micro-contexts of conversation analysis to more expansive social psychological experiments, illustrate how social scientists can unwittingly give more importance to their conceptual constructs than to the agents those constructs are supposed to describe; “having emptied their prose of people, acting as agents, they can refill it with things that act like people”. Ironically, ‘reification’, the name of the error here, was opposed to ‘deification’ that is, the mistaken attribution of godly characteristics to ungodly things. If Billig is to be believed, and I think he should be, many social scientists appear to have unwittingly deified reification itself. This is a problem insofar as social scientists profess to be describing and explaining human behaviour. Once you notice it, there is something unsettling about a field that is oriented towards human activity, yet whose predominant prose style is resolutely unpopulated.

Note that Billig is not arguing that all jargon is problematic, or that long words are never appropriate. Instead, he notes that “the problem with using ‘jargon’ as our critical concept: the word is grammatically indiscriminate”, that is, critiquing jargon in general will tell us little about how words are being used in their contexts. This ties into Billig’s perceptive thought that “we should not assume that technical terms are clearer and more precise than the ordinary ones, for [...] they are often used less precisely and that is why social scientists find them useful”.

Too often, critiques of academic language address its overly ‘technical’ nature. But Billig wants us to change focus. Technicality has its place, but ‘technical’ terms are not exempt from imprecise handling (as if we could create words that are immunized against improper use). Billig illustrates this with an insightful study of Freud’s writing style, which became vaguer the more technical he started to write. Conversely, ‘ordinary’ terms are often used with extreme precision as there is not much room to hide. Admirably, Billig also avoids unwittingly fetishize the ‘ordinary’, as many philosophers are wont to do. His book is stronger for this.

Alongside the overuse of nouns and ghastly noun-phrases, Billig is particularly critical

about the overemployment of the passive voice. With George Orwell, whose recommendations about good prose style he often endorses, Billig is keen to stress that when people use the passive, their writing suffers in two ways. First, their research conveys less information than if the active voice is used in descriptive material. Second, it becomes harder to ascribe agency to the things being written about.

This consolidates the issues arising from the over-use of nouns and noun-phrases, but it brings a rhetorical pay-off, which makes this kind of writing attractive. For if agency is not clearly ascribed, if 'it' or 'the flows' or 'governmentality' are the agents, then an academic can withdraw from the scene and capitalize on the vagaries of their constructions. Billig evidences the power of these rhetorical moves in his study of social psychology. He argues that "[...] experimental social psychologists have developed conventional ways for describing their results which not only are vague, but which also manage rhetorically to produce the effect of exaggerating their findings". Usually, academics exaggerate without a conscious eye to the possible benefits. Indeed, Billig is clear that presenting research in this manner is considered good practice; that is why this concealment is so egregious: it is prevalent and ordinary. Many of Billig's examples are too detailed to justly summarize here, but he uses them to convincingly show how academics "can slide between technical and non-technical meanings, exaggerating without noticing that they are exaggerating, boosting the importance of chosen variables, theories and approaches" in a manner that is to the detriment of good social science.

So why do many contemporary social scientists write like this? Part of Billig's answer is simple: people cannot write well when their institutional context is not structured to allow them to do so. The following story is familiar to most academics. Higher education has expanded rapidly in the last fifty years. Academic teaching loads have increased. Key decision makers, under the influence of economic and political pressure, developed successive reforms designed to measure and control research outcomes; the theory being that this would maximize the research-output of limited resources. Paradoxically, perhaps, this has led to an increase in publications. Billig notes that, "in American universities the proportion of faculty, who had produced five or more publications in the previous two years, exploded from a quarter in 1987 to nearly two-thirds by 1998".

Yet whilst outputs have grown, their form has changed. Longer monographs are now a rarity in the social sciences, with the loss of that extra level of thought and editorial processing that influences long forms of writing. Many other complex reasons have

shaped the contemporary academic landscape, with the consequence that researchers are under increased pressure to 'get out there'. This leads to quick writing. It also generates the "salami slicing" of research to find the smallest publishable unit, or to more egregious repackaging. I once spotted an article, that later became a book chapter, being re-published as an article in a different journal: three publications, one piece of work.

Researchers are under pressure to 'have something', to secure results, to communicate them. In response Billig asks a question that many young academics ask themselves, "Did anyone really imagine that travelling to conferences, staying in hotels with expenses paid, attending drinks receptions and attracting the attention of established figures was a good means to develop original, critical thinking? The more academic friends you make, the longer your list of academics whose work you cannot publically criticize". There is some sense here, although exceptional friends can withstand critique.

Our deeper concern should be about the tightness of the networks that arise organically in contemporary academic contexts. Linguistic islands arise as a consequence of these interactions. If you use certain jargon or terminology then some journals are a no-go area for your work. This makes interdisciplinary research much harder because few academics are sufficiently polyglot to navigate multiple disciplines.

Billig perceptively compares academic development to the learning of a trade. Younger researchers quickly learn the rhetorical gains of certain terms and stylistic traits. Their use of language can both advance an argument of whatever merit and signal that they are members of a certain tribe. All too often, this signaling function is overlooked in arguments about the character of academic language, that is, critics do not attend to how academic language is used. Unsurprisingly, Billig explicitly hails his intellectual indebtedness to Ludwig Wittgenstein and Pierre Bourdieu (only the latter is discussed at length).

One part of this academic apprenticeship is the development of 'an approach'. Billig leads us through the complexities and restrictions of idea, quipping "all social scientists need two approaches: the approach you take and the approach that your approach has taken against". The pressure to produce, and to secure funding, often makes it more important to be more explicit about those approaches you oppose, rather than your positive contribution to good social scientific research.

Much rests on what “good social science” is, exactly. And Billig does not elaborate that at length, beyond the plausible thought that social scientists should be able to distinguish between their theories and theoretical constructs, and the things their theories aim to describe. Any book of this kind will be imperfect, and Billig carefully prefaces his argument with an acknowledgment of its limitations; evidently, any text that examines whole disciplinary swathes will involve some generalizations and risks overlooking positive examples of writing that deviate from the norm. Billig is open about this danger.

He is also forthcoming about his personal failings, “just in case anyone is thinking of trawling through my earlier writings, in order to see whether I was guilty of the very faults that I am now accusing others of committing, let me spare them the bother. I was. In those days I was a good boy, still trying to do what I have been taught to do”. Finally, let me address an obvious outstanding question: Yes, Billig writes well, very well indeed. His prose is richly populated and often funny; any academic who denigrates his own narcissistic love of citation counting by calling himself a “knob head” at the same time as making a point about dual-noun constructions has my admiration.

His argument will interest most academics, not merely those in the social sciences. (Those that are instinctively disinterested should re-read their own work.) Moreover, Billig’s thesis provides succour to those with antecedent resistances or aversions to intellectual writing, a common condition in our society. However, as Billig notes sanguinely, I doubt the book will have a substantial affect on how academics actually write, and thus on the quality of their work. Indeed, his argument was presaged in the words of William Hazlitt, who noted in 1821, “the proper force of words lies not in the words themselves, but in their application. A word may be a fine-sounding word, of an unusual length, and very imposing from its learning and novelty, and yet in the connection in which it is introduced, may be quite pointless and irrelevant” (*On Familiar Style*). Although not much has changed, Billig’s thesis is true nonetheless, and any self-reflective academic or writer will benefit from reading his accomplished study.