

## Adspeak

“Microsoft has provided support for Windows XP for the past 12 years. But now the time has come for us, along with our hardware and software partners, to invest our resources toward supporting more recent technologies so that we can continue to deliver great new experiences.” (13 March 2014)

When I use my computer I am not looking for great new experiences, nor, perhaps, are the rest of the 23.7% of worldwide computer users who use Windows XP. (Source [expertreviews.co.uk](http://expertreviews.co.uk)) Being interpreted, Microsoft means “Now is the time when we can make a lot more money out of our near monopoly by impelling thousands of millions of customers to buy something new.” Their statement is a form of lying, of the kind that used to be called *rhetoric*, to which I add the qualifier *bad* because rhetoric can be used to tell the truth. Use these devices, techniques, the bad rhetorician claims, and you can persuade the readers that their best interests are being served when they are not. In full accordance with the nature of bad rhetoric, this constitutes a false prospectus, because any educated judgement makes us suspicious of bad rhetoric and unwilling to be taken in. But if adspeak is universal does there come a time when it is no longer noticed? It is the universality that is worth noticing; one wonders whether on any other website in the world Microsoft’s soft sell would be thought worth remarking.

A thoughtful politician (*rara avis*) recently circulated an email reminding us what the real questions are in the forthcoming European elections, and wondering how they can be expressed in the sound-bites which all politicians agree are all that the electorate will ever listen to. It is rare to worry that truth and soundbites may be incompatible.

Although bad rhetoric is now heard in all public discourses, its own dear native land is of course advertising.

In the early days of the *Scrutiny* movement advertising was one of the central targets. Literary criticism is the practice of judgement not confined to literature, and the ads of the 1930s were ready-made practical criticism exercises. It is not unheard of now for English teachers to make advertising copy an exercise not in criticism but in creativity.

Characteristic words in adspeak—often adjectives, in itself stylistically a bad sign—include *great* (not *good*), *exciting*, *stunning*, *passionate*. (*Vibrant* is up-market *exciting*.) Is it desirable to be in a perpetual state of excitement? Do you really want to be stunned? *Passionate*, used by the Prime Minister in support of his onslaught on marriage—Why is passion thought to be a good thing in debate? or, as Yeo Valley claim for themselves, in making yoghurt? If you are passionate about making yoghurt won’t you be more likely to spill it?

There are also, of course, verbs. You *deserve* so-and-so. (Use every man after his desert and who should ’scape whipping?)

The intention is to channel the force of a word that gets it from something attractive in life into whatever you are trying to sell. Without its native sustenance of what is really exciting, vibrant, passionate . . . the word wilts, but the advertiser hopes it will have done its work before you realise it is dead.

Then the rhetoric runs its course and is recognised not to work—what could be less exciting than *exciting*?—and the dead word is replaced by something else until it too dies.

Does anybody else think this matters?

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