

ologists do not excel. Without communicating the results of archaeological research to the people whose past they have been

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Nonsense and Jargon in Contemporary Archaeology - a Plea!

The last decade or so has witnessed the publication of a truly substantial amount of archaeological literature which may be fairly classed as apparent nonsense: apparent because the level of jargon in such publications has now reached such a pitch that it is difficult to decide whether the authors are writing sheer gibberish or are merely indulging in a feast of obscure terminology. The situation has, indeed, become grim. One can spend many hours ploughing through a paper and looking up the technical language before arriving at the painful conclusion that the effort has been wasted and the content is quite specious. Furthermore, even in those cases where the paper, upon decoding, actually makes sense and is of some interest, it is all too often the case that the text could have been put more concisely, more plainly and in fewer words with fewer syllables.

At the risk of appearing partisan, it must be stated that the situation is many times worse in the United States than in Britain. This may be related to the volume of archaeological literature published in that country. The quite prodigious amount of material which goes to press each year in America is not, I think, matched by an equally prodigious wealth of original and useful ideas. On the contrary, there is something of a chasm there between quantity and quality. Papers which, scarcely two decades ago, would never have been considered for publication now fill the burgeoning list of journals. Indeed, the quantity of text required yearly to float the pro-

studying, archaeologists have not completed their task.

Nick Merriman

ceedings, the journals, the colloquia, monograph series, reports, newsletters and so on which overwhelm our libraries does more than a little to perpetuate and worsen the situation. And let us not be self-satisfied on this side of the Atlantic: British archaeology is not above such a circus but just (as usual) one step behind.

There is, of course, a place for technical words and phrases in modern archaeological writing; indeed, given the highly interdisciplinary nature of the subject, it would be almost impossible to avoid them. Authors writing papers which incorporate statistical techniques, chemical analysis or specialist information are more than entitled to include appropriate technical terms -- indeed, they would be foolish to invent new terminology, or to try to expand the existing terminology in plain English. More reluctantly we might be willing to accept the technical language which some have adopted from Sociology, Social Anthropology, Linguistics and Psychology; 'modes of production', structural contradictions, Critical Theories, emic/etic distinctions and the 'construction of self' are all more or less necessary shorthand tools of the theoretical apparatus grafted onto modern archaeological studies. And then there are the equilibria, information potentials, feedbacks and so on of the New Archaeology. No, this is not the jargon which I am complaining about although it too makes for turgid and sometimes incomprehensible papers. The jargon which is truly offensive because specious is what, to paraphrase Clifford Geertz, one might call 'thick jargon'.

Thick jargon is a particularly nasty mixture of -emics, -ologies, -ions, -ists and -variables which has more than a touch of Winston Churchill's 'terminological inexactitude': it too is couched in big words which attempt to hide what is being said. But whereas Churchill wished to hide his meaning because of its poignance, thick jargonists (if I may start to indulge in their predilection for inventing tags and -ist nouns) invariably have little to hide since they have so little to say. How many times has one toiled through line after line of systemic-this, entropic-that, societal variables, variances, and goodness knows what else to come to the conclusion that it could all have been said so simply if it were not so banal and utterly self-evident? In truth there is nothing better designed to make one throw up one's hands in despair and to commence retraining as a Chartered Accountant than to fight with a paper for a good half hour only to find that it is all summed up in an inconspicuous sentence on page 20: 'In conclusion it may be seen from this substantive example that systemic inter-variability must be expected in ceramic modes of production' (people make pots differently according to where and when they live and who they are).

We have had bad archaeology with us since the beginning and perhaps the thick jargonists are simply a space-age version of the cataloguers and 'butterfly collectors' of yesteryear; but it is surely time that we started to dig

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European Culture and Identity.

It is generally accepted, and to a certain degree fashionable, to acknowledge that archaeology has political implications. This (obvious ?) dimension of our subject is currently being demonstrated by

our heels in and to expose this fraudulent use, or abuse, of language. In the first place we could all start by asking ourselves 'Do I really need this term?' before adding another piece of obscure terminology to our papers. Still more important, all archaeological students should be encouraged to justify their choice of language: too many tutors and supervisors quietly accept the screens of jargon-loaded paper which students turn in as essays. Admittedly, it would be quite unethical to dictate the language which must be used to express an idea. On the other hand, language is a maze in which it is all too easy to lose oneself; and not to discuss the choice of language is to encourage the mindless copying of superficially popular styles (such as exemplified by Clarke's Analytical Archaeology and a loose and uncritical attitude.

Things have not yet reached the state in which we find American archaeological literature but we should not deceive ourselves into believing that British archaeology will avoid falling into similar errors through pure inertia. These are hard times for the profession and especially for the younger members of its ranks, and there are increasing pressures upon young academics to publish quickly and extensively. Unless we are all very careful, thick jargon could become as commonplace in Britain as it is in America. It is, unfortunately, already with us.

James McVicar.

increased attention towards the position of archaeology in the third world, as well as by studies of its earlier history in our own area. (For example reflected in the different T.A.G. sessions in Durham 1982).