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 favourably described 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 a point of exasperation where it becomes apparent that that effort has been wasted and the content is quite specious. Furthermore, even in those cases where the paper, upon delving, 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, so rarely two decades ago, could 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

Thick jargon is a particularly nasty mixture of -emics, -ologies, -isms and -ariables 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, 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 conclude that the profession is perhaps a space-age version of the cataloguers and 'butterfly collectors' of yesteryear; but it is surely time that we started to dig (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 technique before adding another piece of obscure terminology to our papers. Still more important, all the 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). 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 so commonplace in Britain as it is in America. It is, unfortunately, already with us.

James McVicker

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).
This knowledge, however, seems to have become just another basis for intellectual discourse, and one might therefore rightfully question whether this awareness actually results in increased understanding of our own context, or whether it remains a purely academic exercise. The acceptance of our own subjectivity might have given us some insight (and control) over the most blatant personal biases but I cannot see that we have come any further in understanding our wider context. It is not sufficient to relate to the different 'isms' of the academic world if the political manipulation exercised by the contemporary society and its changing configuration is ignored; history happens around us and ideologies are being created. We are participants in this society and grants and funding are given according to certain priorities.

Maybe we should encourage more...