

Chapter 20

Style in Political Reporting

Dr Kithaka wa Mberia
Department of Linguistics
University of Nairobi, Nairobi
Kenya

1. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we discuss style with reference to political reporting. We examine factors that lead to inappropriate style and suggest strategies that will enable a reporter to achieve a style that is clear, concise and direct.

“Style” means different things depending on the context of usage. We use the term here to refer to the manner in which one handles language as a tool for communication. “Political reporting” is to be understood to refer to the describing or making an account of an event or events that have direct or indirect bearing on people’s public affairs.

The goal of a news reporter, be it political or otherwise, is to inform the public. For the reporter to achieve this end he/she needs to handle language in a manner that facilitates rather than hinders communication. The question is how does one do that? Well we are advised to write in a simple, concise and direct language. The trouble is that, it is easier to recognise “simple,

concise and direct" language in reporting than to write a report that has those characteristics. What devices does the writer of such a report employ to achieve the concise and direct style? In the next few pages we try to answer these and related questions. Our approach will consist of observations and illustrations to give the reader or practical guidance to the writing of stylistically good political reports.

2. AVOID BEING WORDY

A writer can work towards concise language by guarding against being wordy. One way of doing this is to avoid using groups of words that can be substituted with a single word. Consider the following example:

(1a) "According to the minister's speech, it is possible that those who planned to topple the government were given assistance by accomplices from other countries."

The above sentence is grammatically correct, but is it not possible to convey its information in a better way? The answer is yes. Let us consider another example.

(1b) The minister said that those who planned to topple the government were possibly assisted by foreign accomplices.

We view (1b) as a better sentence than (1a). It is more concise. But how do the two sentences differ in terms of composition? They differ in a number of ways. Sentence (1b) uses finer words than sentence (1a) which says "according to the minister's speech (5 words), sentence (1b) uses "the minister said" (3 words).

Sentence (1a) says "were given assistance" (3 words) whereas in (1b) we have "were assisted" (2 words). Moreover "accomplices from other countries" (4 words) in (1a) is substituted with "foreign accomplices" (2 words). Because (1b) uses language more economically, it communicates more concisely than (1a).

Let us examine another example of a wordy construction: (2a) "The Prime-Minister made it known that in view of the fact that the Treasury needed more funds, it was considered appropriate for the government to introduce new custom rates."

This sentence tells us why, according to the Prime-Minister, the government introduced new custom rates. The sentence is grammatically well constructed. However, its information can be communicated in a sharper manner. Sentence (2b) does it:

(2b) "The Prime-Minister said that the government introduced new custom rates because the Treasury needed more funds."

3 AVOID EXCESSIVE DETAIL

One characteristic of poor style is excessive detail. A writer who becomes over-enthusiastic with detail and says what can be inferred from the context, stresses readers' patience unnecessarily. Let us consider (3a) below:

(3a) "The President announced that soon there will be parliamentary elections to determine the most suitable persons to represent their constituent's interests in parliament."

We do not need to be told that the elections are meant to determine suitable persons. Elections, of whatever kind are held

to determine a suitable person or persons. Moreover, what would be the work of persons elected in parliamentary elections if not to present their constituents' interests? In short we can infer most of the information given in (3a). All the writer needed tell us is:

(3b) "The President announced that there will be parliamentary elections soon.

Another example of belabouring the obvious is (4a) below:

(4a) "In the meantime, it has been announced from the Office of the Attorney General that plans have been finalised for a national census whereby all persons male or female, old or young, employed or unemployed, will be counted."

After mentioning "all persons" the sentence goes on to specify that "all persons" consists of "male or female, old or young" and "employed or unemployed." One need not specify these categories of persons. Indeed one even need not state "all persons" because it is included in the definition of a national census, which is "a head count of all persons in a nation." To communicate all the information in (4a) all that one should say is:

(4b) "In the meantime, it has been announced from the Office of the Attorney-General that plans for a national census have been finalised."

A final illustration of a sentence that says much that is obvious is (5a) below:

(5a) "The Minister for Health announced yesterday that the Medical School will train more doctors to take care of peoples' health so that they become more productive thereby strengthening the national economy."

A better version of the report would be:

(5b) "The Minister for Health announced that the Medical School will train more doctors."

4. QUALIFY NOUNS ONLY WHEN NECESSARY

Sometimes we qualify nouns unnecessarily by using redundant modifiers. This, of course results in longer sentences than would be the case. Moreover, such sentences are less concise than their shorter versions. Let us consider (6a)

(6a) The Commissioner said that the government will institute certain curative measures to contain the current discomfoting inflation. All the modifiers in this sentence can be eliminated without any effect on the meaning.

After editing out all the unnecessary modifiers from (6a) we are left with a sharper sentence in the form of (6b)

(6b) "The Commissioner said that the government will institute measures to contain inflation.

5. AVOID POMPOUS VOCABULARY

A writer should avoid using uncommon words or phrases that are intended to impress the reader. Let us look at the following sentence:

(7a) "The meeting ended acrimoniously after the Minister became cross and accused his interviewers of arrogance. The members of the Fourth Estate were desirous of knowing what had

become of the ministry's purchasing vote."

What does the ordinary newspaper reader understand by "members of the Fourth Estate." Who are they?

What does such a reader make of words such as "acrimoniously," "cross," "desirous" and "vote"?

Surely the same information could be given in simpler language. Example (7b) does so:

(7b) "The meeting ended on an unfriendly note after the minister became angry and accused his interviewers of arrogance. The journalists had wanted to know what becomes of the money set aside for purchases in the ministry."

Many unfamiliar words and phrases are borrowed. These are words and phrases that enter a language from other languages. English, for instance, has borrowed substantially from Latin, Greek and French. Some of the borrowings have become common and are understandable even by the average user of English. Others are not very familiar to many. Examples of such borrowings are *locus standi*, *prima facie*, *proletariat*, *ipso facto*, and *litterati*. When a writer uses such terms in a report he/she is likely to inconvenience many readers.

(i) *Strive to Be Exact*

Whenever possible, be exact. Avoid using meandering descriptions that can be replaced with a word or two. For instance, say *dentist* instead of "the doctor who examines and treats people's teeth and gums." To illustrate this issue further,

let us look at the following sentence:

(8a) "Highly placed resources in Abuja say that the men and women who serve in the Nigerian army, airforce and navy have decided to hand over power to civilians early next year." The men and women who serve in the Nigerian army, airforce and navy, are really the "Nigerian military." When we use the exact word "military" we get the following sentence:

(8b) "Highly placed sources in Abuja say that the Nigerian Army has decided to hand over power to civilians early next year."

(ii) *Make the Report Cohesive*

A good report is characterised not only by simple concise and direct sentences but by a natural flow as well. A writer should ensure that he/she writes paragraphs in such a manner that there is a logical sequence from words and phrase that are not commonly used, or are only used in restricted circles.

6. AVOID REDUNDANCY

Sometimes we use phrases that are outrightly redundant. This situation is illustrated by the following sentence:

(9a) "The car from which the bullet was fired was described as white in colour, sedan in shape and shiny in appearance." A

more concise way is:

(9b) "The car from which the bullet was fired was described as a shiny, white sedan."

7. AVOID USING SYNONYMS TOGETHER

Occasionally one comes across repetitions in the form of two (or more) synonyms or near-synonyms used together. A sentence so constructed will not be elegant at all. To illustrate this observation, let us look at (10a) below:

(10a) "The Cabinet Sub-committee has ordered the Commissioner of Police to carry out a thorough and comprehensive investigation into the assassination of the guerrilla leader."

The words "thorough" and "comprehensive" are synonymous. When we use both of them together we get the same meaning as when we use one of them. Thus, (10b) and (10c) below carry the same information as (10a):

(10b) "The Cabinet Sub-committee has ordered the Commissioner of Police to carry out a thorough investigation into the assassination of the guerrilla leader."

(10c) The Cabinet Sub-committee has ordered the Commissioner of Police to carry out a comprehensive investigation into the assassination of the guerrilla leader.

8. USE VERBS AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE

Where a writer can choose between a noun form or the corresponding verb, it is advisable to use the latter. Let us return

to sentences (10b) and (10c). Each of them has the words "carry out ... investigation." "Investigation" is a noun derived from the verb "investigate." In other words, the noun "investigation" corresponds to the verb "investigate." When we substitute the verb for the corresponding noun we have:

(10d) "The Cabinet Sub-committee has ordered the Commissioner of Police to thoroughly investigate the assassination of the guerrilla leader."

(10e) "The Cabinet Sub-committee has ordered the Commissioner of Police to comprehensively investigate the assassination of the guerrilla leader."

When discussing sentences (1a) and (1b) we pointed out that changing "According to the minister's speech" into "the minister said" makes (1b) a better construction than (1a). We further pointed out that (1b) has other merits over (1a). These merits result from the use of the verb "assisted" instead of the corresponding noun "assistance." Thus:

(1a) According to the Minister's speech, it is possible that those who planned to topple the government were given assistance by accomplices from other countries."

(1b) "The Minister said that it is possible that those who planned to topple the government, were assisted by foreign accomplices."

9. USE ACTIVE VOICE WHENEVER POSSIBLE

Constructions that use logical subjects as grammatical subjects communicate in a more direct manner than those that use logical subjects as grammatical objects. Another way of achieving the same results is to use active rather than passive voice in a sentence. Let us examine the example below:

(11a) "The crucial decision was taken by the cabinet yesterday."

This sentence uses the logical subject (that is the doer of the action or the cause of a condition) not as a grammatical subject but as an object. Likewise the sentence uses passive rather than active voice. When we implement any of the two recommendations above, that is (a) use active rather than passive voice, we get a better sentence than (11a). Thus:

(11b) "The cabinet took the crucial decision yesterday."

Implementing either of the above recommendations yield the same results because the two issues are related. When we use a logical subject in the grammatical subject position, we automatically have an active voice in the sentence. Likewise when we choose to use the direct voice in a sentence it becomes necessary to use the logical subject as the grammatical subject.

10. AVOID ANY CONSTRUCTION WITH DOUBLE MEANINGS

Ambiguity is another aspect of language that a writer should strive to avoid. Ambiguity comes about when one uses a word that has more than one meaning or more than one function. It can also arise from the nature of a construction. The following sentence is ambiguous:

(12) "Elsewhere, the Director for Civil Aviation has advised the residents of Mawembe Village to avoid flying balloons."

It is not clear whether the Director for Civil Aviation advised the villagers to keep away from balloons that are flying or whether he/she advised them not to fly balloons. This ambiguity results from the nature of the word "flying" which functions both as an adjective as well as a verb. Another example of ambiguity is given in (13) below:

(13) "The Minister reconciled with the Deputy Mayor in his office. The occasion was witnessed by his wife and several colleagues."

Both sentences in (13) are unclear. Each of them leads to questions in the mind of the reader. In whose office did the reconciliation take place - the Minister's or the Deputy Mayor's? And whose wife witnessed the occasion? Is it the Minister's wife or the Deputy Mayor's wife? The last part of the second sentence is the most ambiguous; it has a four-way ambiguity. Whose colleagues witnessed the occasion? It could be colleagues to the

Minister, to the Deputy Mayor, to the Minister's wife or to the Deputy Mayor's wife.

To achieve the above qualities in a report, a writer needs to utilise a number of strategies: First, he/she should be systematic. Secondly he/she should punctuate the work correctly. Thirdly, he/she should use appropriate conjunctions in the right places. And finally, he/she should properly use connecting phrases and words such as "in the meantime" and "elsewhere." When a writer faithfully uses these strategies, he/she will have gone a long way towards achieving a cohesive report.

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