



You may mean what you say but do you say what you mean?



I FOUND two letters to the editor of the *Dominion Post* earlier this year of interest.

The first, from Alistair Griffiths of Thorndon, advocated closing the Ministry of Women's Affairs because "Women are having affairs everywhere. We don't need a ministry to promote them."

The second letter writer, Graham Parsons of Palmerston North, had decided not to buy a car discussed by the *Dominion Post*'s motoring correspondent a few days earlier, because he had been told that the car consumed petrol at a rate of "7.9 litres per kilometre", and he didn't think he could afford it.

On the same day, I heard on Radio New Zealand National's *Checkpoint* programme of a rapist that "his parents separated from the age of three". If they separated that early, I'm surprised they were physically able to become parents.

Language is immensely complicated and it is very easy to get it wrong on the

spur of the moment, as the motoring correspondent presumably did. On the other hand, many people do not make a great effort to be precise. This looks as though it is what happened in the *Checkpoint* example. We can work out that the parents cannot have separated at age three, so we recalculate, and deduce that it must have been when the child was aged three.

The case of Women's Affairs is rather different: we could argue as to whether there were two words "affair" or two different meanings of the same word "affair", but in either case the outcome is that "women's affairs" is ambiguous because of the structure of English.

Is it sufficient if people can work out what you must have meant or do you have to be more precise than that? Here, surely, it depends upon what you are attempting to do and in what context you are attempting to do it. Those who draft our laws must be very precise or the law will not do what it is intended to do.



Academics, in general, tend to be very fussy about saying exactly what they intend to say. This is part of what makes academic prose so difficult to read for those who are not used to the style. Wearing my professional hat, I point out to doctoral students at the university that near enough is not good enough when it comes to writing a thesis: you have to say what you mean (which implies that you have to know exactly what it is you want to say).

Among friends, however, such specificity is rarely needed. My parents had a helper who would sigh and say, "It's just a phrase they're going through", and everybody knew what she meant, even though she was not being precise. This use of the wrong word for the context is called a Malapropism, after Mrs Malaprop, a character in Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1775), who always spoke mal a propos 'inappropriately'. The label may be from the 18th century, but the habit is much older: Dogberry in Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* asks, "Is our whole company dissembled?" Malapropisms, ambiguities and incomplete information

thrive in everyday conversation, and as long as that is not judged by the same standards as academic prose, very little harm usually comes of it. If you really fail to understand, you can ask.

In more public environments, though, more damage can be done. Graham Parsons was able to determine that he had been given wrong information about a car, but if that information genuinely put people off buying the vehicle, the manufacturers would not be pleased. Journalists (including broadcast journalists) have to be careful that they are not falsifying the news by paraphrasing inaccurately. People in business have to take care not to be inadvertently offensive to customers.

The failure to say what you really mean is not always important, but takes on greater importance in public dialogue. Getting the message right requires care, not only care to state the facts accurately, but care to make sure the structure of English is not leading you to say something unintended.

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