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We need higher standards for academic writing

Confused thinking and confusing prose has led to a reversible decline

The Critic, Artillery Row

By

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9 January, 2025

At the end of 2024, a short-lived Twitter/X storm raised significant questions about the nature of academic work and public engagement with such work, especially on social media. It also raised questions of the types of language, which some would call jargon, used in certain forms of academic writing, and what purpose it actually serves.

On 27 November, successful University of Cambridge English Literature PhD candidate Amelia Louks [posted a picture of herself holding a bound copy of her dissertation, and announced](#) “Thrilled to say that I passed my viva with no corrections and am officially #PhDone”. The title was “Olfactory Ethics: The Politics of Smell in Modern and Contemporary Prose”. The thesis was [deposited at the Cambridge online repository](#), the abstract visible, but the main thesis kept under embargo, so inaccessible without a special request. This is common, as many people seek to publish a modified version of their thesis as a book, and some publishers are less inclined to spend time and money publishing material already freely available online.

Louks’ original tweet has to date received over 120 million views and over 12K replies. There were legions of dismissive comments about the thesis subject, misogynistic remarks about Louks, and much more which was abusive. This is utterly to be deplored.

As almost no-one was able to access the thesis proper, comments related to the abstract. This included phrases like “the language of smell and the olfactory imagination it creates — in structuring our social world”. It also stated that the thesis offers “an intersectional and wide-ranging study of olfactory oppression by establishing the underlying logics that facilitate smell’s application in creating and subverting gender, class, sexual, racial and species power structures.”

This construction evokes commonplace sociological terms and ideas. The “olfactory imagination” is reminiscent of [C. Wright Mills’ *The Sociological Imagination* \(1959\)](#), a hugely influential text. Wright Mills coined the term to refer to the work undertaken by a sociologist to conceptualise and articulate the relationship between individuals and the societies they inhabited, between the private and the public. This requires a synthetic act of imagination to create models for that which is not necessarily self-evident. Louks appears to be positing that individuals create their own models of the

social world at least in part through the smells which they come to associate with certain types.

The second quote is run-of-the-mill identity politics. The word “intersectional” comes from Kimberley Crenshaw and her article “[Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color](#)” (1991), referring essentially to the fact that there are multiple forms of oppression which need to be considered together. The phrase “underlying logics that facilitate smell’s application” is jargonistic; the quote as a whole (which, like much such writing, studiously avoids identifying specific human agents) is saying that some (unnamed) people deem some from groups deemed to be oppressed as lesser on the basis of smells associated collectively with those groups, but it is also possible for smell somehow to be used to subvert this. “Power structures” is an outgrowth of the very common sociological term “social structure”, a somewhat problematic and ambiguous concept used in different ways, defined by *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology* to refer to either “observable patterns in social practices” or “structure in the underlying principle of social arrangements, which may not be observable”. The use of the term “structure” can suggest something fixed, but sociologists such as Norbert Elias emphasised how such structures are dynamic and historically contingent. “Power structures” focuses specifically on inequalities and consequent imbalances of power, and the term is usually pejorative.

Much else could be said about the language of the abstract, which may also be the source of some of the antipathy. Some of the language serves to locate the thesis within a particular academic context, drawing attention to how it overlaps with the concerns of others. However, to those familiar with this style of writing, this makes it look considerably less original. I have not read the thesis, so could not comment, and remain open to the possibility that the content is more stimulating and innovative than the abstract suggests.

That smell (and taste) can be powerful and can be used for literary effect, as well as serving to signify particular environments, times, people, is well-known to scholars and others. An obvious example comes right at the beginning of George Orwell’s [The Road to Wigan Pier](#) (1936) (a text which Louks’ abstract indicates is the first she considers), describing a hostel where he is staying with an elderly mechanic, an injured miner and several others. He says “in the morning the room stank like a ferret’s cage”, and that if one left the room and returned, “the smell hit you in the face with a smack”. [The critic John Carey](#) draws out a range of Orwell’s sentiments in this regard (Orwell writes “do the ‘lower classes’ smell? Of course, as a whole, they are dirtier than the upper classes”), and links them to fundamental barriers of class in Orwell’s mind (though I would say he could be expressing a natural human reaction on the part of anyone who values cleanliness). Salman Rushdie’s [Midnight Children](#) (1981) features a recurrent motif of the smell and taste of green chutney representing a type of elemental force in the face of other threatening smells:

Because I sniffed the air; and scented, behind the solicitous expressions of my visitors, a sharp whiff of danger. I intended to defend myself; but I required the assistance of chutney ...

Towards the end of the novel, Rushdie describes being given a bowl of such chutney which “carried me back to a day when I emerged nine-fingered from a hospital and

went into exile at the home of Hanif Aziz ... the old taste itself, the very same, with the power of bringing back the past as if it had never been away.” This evocation is clearly reminiscent of [Marcel Proust’s description of the taste of a madeleine](#), dipped in tea, which unlocks a whole range of memory which had previously remained closed.

Returning to Louks, various media outlets commented on the responses she had received. Almost all rightly condemned personalised and misogynistic abuse. Various others, [such as Callum Booth in Forbes](#), argued that the critiques came from the political right, and that views of lay readers were immaterial (a view [echoed in a contemptuous manner by Louks herself](#)), as “laypeople are going to find this dense and borderline nonsensical — that’s the nature of specific academic writing”, comparing it to quantum physics. But this argument is too easy. No less a figure than [Noam Chomsky](#) has argued that even for an open-minded and educated intellectual like himself, some vogueish theorists — he names Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Jean-François Lyotard and Julie Kristeva — write in an impenetrable and opaque style (Chomsky is prepared to consider this may just be his failing, but I think this unlikely), and when writing on areas familiar to him, such as Derrida on language, he identifies elementary misreadings and highly flawed arguments. Chomsky contrasts this with fields including physics, maths, biology, in which he can ask friends to explain things at a level he can understand, which they can usually do, and if interested, he can usually proceed to learn more and ultimately understand the work. This is rarely the case with a lot of capital-T “Theory” in the humanities. Jean Bricmont and [Alan Sokal](#) notoriously, in their book [Fashionable Nonsense/Intellectual Impostures](#) (1997) considered a range of similar figures to Chomsky, specifically in terms of their employment of concepts from science, and also found a trail of basic conceptual and other misunderstandings.

Neither Chomsky nor Sokal (who chose to teach in Nicaragua in the 1980s under the communist Sandinista government) could possibly be called figures of the right, and both note the lack of practical interaction with wider day-to-day politics on the part of such intellectuals. Both also highlight such a style of writing as a means of insulating work from proper rational criticism and as such protecting the (arguably unjustified) position of an intellectual elite, a clear case of “power structures” *within academia*. Many keen to diagnose power structures elsewhere are reluctant to apply such a critique to themselves, their own positions, and ways in which their work might reinforce such structures.

A range of writers, including George Orwell, Theodor Adorno, Raymond Williams, Kenneth Hudson, Walter Nash and Michael Billig, have considered the role of jargon or at least forbidding language. Some like Adorno and Williams, and also in some ways Roland Barthes and Derrida, maintained that new employments of language are necessary to permit ways of seeing the world beyond those provided by dominant ideologies. This can certainly be true, but when such employments become themselves dominant, such a critical function is noticeably diminished. In 1978 [Hudson attempted](#) to distinguish *technical language* and *jargon*, and was scathing about wilful use of jargon by “intellectually inferior people, who feel a need to convince the general public of their importance”, and actually mentioned the use of jargon in musical discourse as a means of defending against exterior criticism.

Hudson's disdain even for relatively easily-explained terms was too extreme. More cogent was the critique in [Michael Billig's *Learn to Write Badly: How to Succeed in the Social Sciences*](#). Billig criticised sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who had himself noted the difficulty for working-class people in understanding academic language, and how professors can create situations whereby students can link terms together but not understand them, but nevertheless coined neologisms himself and avoided simpler words, adding suffixes (for example by turning "habit" into "habitus") as "badges of scholarly membership". Billig investigates in detail the use of terms like "ideational metafunction" instead of simply "content", and noted how few of those who use the former demonstrate any of the specific theoretical understanding that accompanied the term when first developed, so it is redundant ("content" would be much better). He worried however that if students and academics do use "simple, clear language", then "they will risk appearing as if they were inadequate, untrained and, most important, as if they did not belong."

Whilst I believe there is a place for more specialised language to increase precision, or simply avoid having to repeatedly spell out certain things, I recognise much of what Billig diagnoses, and also how he relates this to management terms like "outsourcing", "delaying" or "downsizing" to camouflage what they are doing. I have sometimes attempted "translations" of jargon-ridden phrases in musicology (as Wright Mills did in *The Sociological Imagination* of some passages from the sociologist Talcott Parsons), such as [the following](#):

In this way she [Lydia Goehr] seems to recognize that there is no single privileged location of musical meaning, but that it may be distributed across and configured by the relations between its several mediations.

I would rewrite this as:

In this way Goehr seems to recognize that musical meaning varies considerably depending upon time, place and listener, and there is therefore no reason to privilege any one such context.

What does it mean to say that the meaning of a musical work can be "distributed across and configured by the relations between its several mediations"? How is a meaning "distributed across" "relations"? The manneristic term "privileged location" renders what is already a vague concept — "musical meaning" — with a spatial or geographical metaphor.

Another example is [the following](#):

Music's affiliation with orientalism is made poignant by Western culture's habit of Othering its own musical practices.

Which I would rewrite (and explain) as:

Westerners have and express conservative ideas about nation, class or gender, and use the same language to describe their distrust for music as being irrational, sensual or unnatural, as they do with respect to the "Orient".

This avoids passive constructions and attribution of agency to homogenous entities. Such an assertion needs to be properly substantiated, with evidence, which is not the case here. Jargon here and elsewhere serves to make bland assertions seem more scholarly rigorous than they actually are.

[Interviewed by Times Higher Education](#), Louks herself argued that the Twitter/X platform, since it was bought by Elon Musk in October 2022, is “no longer invested in preventing its users from suffering abuse” but indicated intent to stay on the platform in order to “reach a wider, non-academic audience”. It remains to be seen whether such an audience — whose views she has already dismissed if at all critical — will actually engage with her work when/if it becomes available, and responses will be more edifying than either simple adulation or contemptuous dismissal. As for abuse on Twitter/X and its being unmoderated, that situation [long predates](#) when the platform was bought by Musk.

At a time of financial crisis in UK universities, [the fifth most expensive destination for higher education in the world](#), questions are inevitable about where resources, derived from fees and taxpayer-subsidised loan schemes, are being allocated. It is legitimate to ask whether fee income is subsidising highly esoteric research (bearing in mind that [many PhDs constitute a net loss to institutions](#), especially when studentships are involved), or at least ask what the net social benefit might be of such research, either in the short- or long-term. To express curt sentiments about lay people not understanding is arrogant and entitled; it is the duty of publicly-funded academics or at least some representing them to convince a lay public. This is especially true when those academics themselves regularly pass negative judgement on that very public, pronouncing many of them bigots, racists, but then crying foul if any respond, the typical behaviour of what Julie Burchill memorably called the “[cry-bully](#)”.

One of the most interesting responses to Louks, to my mind, was that from writer and journalist [Ella Dorn](#). Dorn categorised some of the more sympathetic responses (which said, for example, that others “don’t know what a PhD is”) as “reactionary niceness”. Noting the range of [publicly-funded research projects collected by journalist Charlotte Gill](#), some of which are undoubtedly cranky and heavily politicised, but receive large amounts of public money, Dorn asked why it was Louks’ thesis which received so much more attention. Her answer was that this was not because it is hyper-specific, in the humanities, nor even because she is a woman, but because the abstract reveals this to be about “a series of sociopolitical truisms that are *already the institutional status quo*, and have been for over forty years”. Dorn maintains that Louks’ choice of texts is quite obvious, and the abstract employs highly simplistic oppositions. As for the language of “intersectionality”, “discourse”, “misogynoir”, or “class antipathy”, she said that anyone under the age of 30 pursuing the humanities “knows what it is to be beaten over the head repeatedly by this very lexicon.”

Dorn went on to argue that many UK undergraduate courses, whatever the subject, are simply about structural oppressions, and that beneath the multisyllabic words lie the same theories preached by diversity trainers. The theories are not difficult to understand, and those who do have not achieved anything remarkable. But this type of academic monoculture (my term) is crowding out other forms of learning, as witnessed by the lacklustre teaching in Chinese philology Dorn herself received

during the Chinese and Linguistics degree she recently completed at SOAS. During this, she herself encountered routine reading, of questionable relevance, on olfactory oppression. Whilst remaining open to the possibility that a reading of the actual thesis might prove her wrong, Dorn — having read a range of Cambridge English PhD abstracts, located this on one side of a divide which project modern political ideologies onto texts from the past, as distinct from those which trace the development of historical concepts. While abusive responses, which included rape threats, are always wrong, it is nevertheless right “to hold Cambridge academics to a certain standard”, bearing in mind their own privileged position, and “stop people within academia from acting as if they are the only ones who ‘get it’”. [In a range of tweets](#), Dorn alluded to a range of scientific literature on olfactory responses which suggested that they might actually be more universal than culturally constructed.

I am very glad Dorn published her article. What she diagnoses is something I have seen first-hand in academic music and other disciplines. Proper historical scholarship, engagement with texts in foreign languages, score-reading, advanced aural skills, knowledge of music theory and analysis, historical conditions of performance, aesthetics and their philosophical provenance, and much more are often no longer necessary so long as one’s work ticks the right boxes in terms of discussing structural oppression. In parts of my adopted discipline of sociology (which remains an area where much more innovative thinking is possible than in many of the humanities) sustained engagement with an rich and highly diffuse tradition of social thought (or even social thought from outside the Western world other than that of [Frantz Fanon](#), [Edward Said](#), and a few select others) can be a secondary concern compared to didactic views on race, class, gender, etc., and a plethora of writings the outcomes of which are utterly predictable.

But the most important aspect of Dorn’s piece relates to proper critical engagement with and scepticism towards academic work. [The philosopher Kathleen Stock has contrasted](#) the culture of her days as a graduate student in the 1990s with that which succeeded it, a form of Dorn’s “reactionary niceness” whereby academics fail to ask challenging questions in public in favour of obsequious and cloying praise, but engage in other forms of aggression, especially on the internet, especially in closed groups of “friends”. This is somewhat different from the type of wholly public debate faced by Louks. Beyond this, there is a huge amount of virtue-signalling, gatekeeping and an attitude which legitimises self-aggrandisement and bullying in the name of “social justice”. Some of this has been fuelled by organisations such as Woman in Philosophy, who in a [2011 report](#) attacked robust questioning in the seminar room as “stereotypically male behaviour”. Well-established and sound modes of scholarly argument and debate are replaced by ad hominem attacks, distortions and wilful misreadings, vague extrapolations, straw-man caricatures, condemnation of a whole body of work on the basis that its writer holds one heterodox opinion, and so on (see [my article on academic mobbing](#) for more on this).

One can also encounter decreasingly scholarly responses to critical reviews. International relations and law academic [Yuan Yi Zhu](#) published a fair if critical review of [Alan Lester \(ed.\), *The Truth about Empire: Real Histories of British Colonialism*](#) (2024), from a medium position between the unreservedly hostile perspectives on the British Empire described from most contributors, and the much [more benign view of retired Oxford theologian Nigel Biggars](#). Whilst

recognising the value of some contributions, Zhu took great objection to a “self-discrediting and morally bankrupt” chapter by Liam Liburd comparing the 1943 Bengal famine to the Nazi gas chambers, and obliterating the role of Imperial Japan. Lester replied with a blog post (later withdrawn) largely pulling rank on Zhu as a much more junior scholar, and also attempting to discredit his work on account of his association with the think tank [Policy Exchange](#), rather than addressing the substance of his critiques.

I have myself published some harsh reviews (as well as positive and mixed ones), such as [this review-article](#) (aspects of which were developed further in this [longer metacritique](#)) of a book I also thought thoroughly hagiographic and slavish in its adherence to and reiteration of the composer’s own views, as well as displaying a contorted writing style, little critical attention to sources, lack of either independent musical analysis or wider contextual musical knowledge, and of methodological reflection, ignoring most issues raised in musicology over a period of around three decades. The review was not easy to write, and edits to temper the tone somehow made the criticisms seem even harsher. But I do not regret it, as I think it was an extremely weak book which should not be taken at face value. For sure many other weak books are published, but as this was on a very specialised subject and was the largest work of its type in English, I was concerned this would become seen as a definitive resource, and that would deter publishers from considering other writings on the composer.

There was no response by the author to the substance of my criticisms (which would have been entirely legitimate — others with relevant expertise took a more positive view of the book than I had). Instead I later encountered some text from them addressed to scholars, attacking the very fact that such a review, portrayed as a personal attack, could be published, expressing hope nothing of this type would be today. Nothing in the review to my knowledge is personal, and I had never met the author. To disallow harsh reviews would be to sacrifice a major outlet for robust critical debate, and some of the internal self-correcting mechanisms which I believe are vital for scholarship. *Not* to enter into critique of work one believes is fundamentally flawed, for which one can supply evidence and/or argument, is a neglect of an academic’s duty.

Overall, relentless interrogation of all and any claims made in academic work should be the norm, not an exception. For the original author(s) to weather this requires them to have developed some resilience, and I would be wary about being so harsh on someone else’s doctoral student (but continue to challenge my own to the maximum). Jargon used simply to mystify and deter wider public engagement and critique, or simply as a result of bad writing, should be exposed for what it is on all occasions.

Academia needs to insist continuously on the highest of standards, and the widest reach possible for their writings without compromising the content, if it is to command wider respect.

Some in academia are however hostile to this. These include many artistic practitioners, whose culture tends not to feature such debate; some from post-1992 institutions with more authoritarian management cultures; and especially some associated with identity politics. These latter often portray any criticism of their own

work as always personal, and an attack not just upon them as an individual, but on all members of the identity group of which they are part. But pandering to this makes it practically impossible to guarantee that such individuals will be respected *as scholars*. If such respect is just an automatic result of what they were born, then it is meaningless.

Louks' work may be remarkable, or it may be relatively average — only when the thesis is made available or published will one be able to judge. Certainly the abstract situates it in a particular familiar context, by virtue of the terminology and jargon employed, and this may prove beneficial in securing wider academic favour. It is right that this wider process, and the broader academic culture which favours certain types of approach over others for mainly ideological reasons, continues to be scrutinised from within and without academia.