

EVASION -
THE ENGLISH DICTIONARY

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This is a short book about short words—*like* and *but*, *it* and *you*—the mainstays of speech that go unexamined, those throw-away words by which we reveal what we mean, no matter how hard we try not to.

This is a dictionary, in other words, to help you translate not only somebody else's speech but your own, from evasion to English, trick to truth. It identifies and interprets shibboleths of shamming, words we use either out of slackness of speech or because they get us what we want. Either way, whether daft or deft, we use these words to duck the truth.

So, here are some problematic terms and suggested substitutions. Most of the words in *The Evasion-English Dictionary* earned inclusion because hearing them annoyed me. But some entries were born on occasions when I found myself struck by the absence of evasion in someone's speech.

Change your words, I believe, and you change your deeds. It is, for example, harder to look somebody in the eye and say "I am unproductive" than it is to say "I feel unproductive." We do what is easy, and if I cringe at the admission that I am unproductive, perhaps that will spur me to industry. If I commit to being honest, I'll have less to evade.

The hope, in other words, is that this taxonomy of speech will inject a little self-consciousness into our daily speech. I don't know when *self-consciousness* became a negative term; maybe about the time that *consciousness* did. But let's put down the script and exert ourselves to be more honest. Discomfort yourself with the truth. Conversations should invite

frankness. Instead, modern conversation is excruciatingly considerate; so determined are we to dodge discussion and the perils of disagreement that we dilute talk with unassailable phrases that do little more than lob back the ball to keep the game going.

Imagine if someone said, "I have money trouble but I don't like to think about it," and you replied, "If you don't think about it, you'll continue to have money trouble." The impertinence. The person will look askance as though to say, "No, dear, you've gone off script; the way it works is, *I* say, 'I have money trouble but I don't like to think about it,' and *you* say, 'There, there, hon.'"

It's as though we've turned the game of conversation into a ritual. A game, as Claude Lévi-Straus says in *The Savage Mind*, has any number of outcomes. You might lose. Or worse, you might win. A ritual, on the other hand, is the reenactment of the preferred instance of the game. No surprises. Such reenactment typically has come to make use of a number of meaningless placeholders, or *phatic communion*, to use the term coined by social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, to describe phrases such as "Nice weather we're having," or "How ya doing" (the latter, by the way, not insignificantly lacking a question mark). For instance, I recently watched two people pass each other in the office. One greeted the other with, "Hey, how's it going." The second person, whose first language isn't English, stopped, thought for a moment, and began to answer the question sincerely: "Well, not so great...." Too late; Guy 1 was already past us and around the corner. Guy 2 looked at me bewildered. "Why did he ask if he didn't want the answer?"

We use phatic communion to establish sociability; it is civilly clearing its throat. Ideally, this form of speech leads up to more substantive discussion. Unfortunately, as the two guys show, it often doesn't work that way, and phatic communion has stretched to comprise much of common discourse. It protracts throughout the conversation, a preface to empty discourse—a ritualized game.

The suggestion of the *E.E.D.*, then, is that you risk losing. Risk winning. Stretch your muscles. No more placeholders, no more *phatic communion*. Say what you mean, however discomfiting, to you or your listener. Purge from your speech that Creole of English, that pop-culture patois, that American dodge of a dialect I call Evasion-English.

