



The Margaret Thatcher Lecture Series

The 2003 Margaret Thatcher Lecture
by
Sir Martin Sorrell

March 24, 2003

With an introduction by
William R. Miller OBE
ESU Chairman

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I am pleased to welcome you tonight to this second presentation in the Margaret Thatcher Lecture Series. I would especially like to greet some special guests: Sir Thomas Harris, British Consul General in New York, and Lady Harris; and Lady Sorrell. Also with us this evening is Mrs. Doe Thornburg, the ESU's National President, a valued and vital member of our National Board of Directors.

Ladies and gentlemen, before we begin the evening's program, I'd like to tell you a little about The English-Speaking Union itself. This audience is largely composed of "old hands" – past supporters of this lecture series – so I promise to be brief. But for those of you who don't know what we do, we contribute to the creation of global understanding through English. We try to accomplish that through a variety of English-language based programs that support appreciation and improved command of English among native English speakers, as well as mastery of colloquial English for non-native English speakers.

Our educational outreach includes international exchanges and scholarships for both students and teachers; language and literature programs; book exchanges; and conversation practice for newcomers to the States. The ESU also offers continuing education programs that include our newest initiative, interactive workshops for teachers that provide practical ideas and approaches for teaching Shakespeare; and our National Speaker Program, through which lecturers address our 10,000 members across the country on current affairs, world politics, university life, art and literature.

For the most part, these programs are carried on in our 78 domestic Branches. But, recognizing the meteoric increase in the number of English-speakers around the world in the last decade – a billion at last count – we have taken advantage of a global network that includes 50 international ESUs and begun to partner with them in exciting new ventures that support the learning and use of English.

The globalization of the ESU has taken us well beyond our original boundaries. When we were founded in 1920, the English-speaking world consisted of the United States and the Commonwealth nations. In 2003, you can travel to the most exotic corners of the world and still find someone who speaks English. Today, one out of four of the world's population speaks English to some level of competence. In our new headquarters, we've recently re-hung one of our great treasures, a mural that when originally commissioned by the ESU depicted the places on the map where English was the first language. It's fascinating to look at it today and try to find places where English is not routinely in evidence, publicly accessible in varying degrees and part of the nation's recent or present identity. In these places, English is spoken as a primary tool of international communication and practiced most widely by the business, scientific, political and academic communities.

We've witnessed this explosion of English in our own programs: our Branches annually send sets of award-winning books about American life and culture to ESUs in Katmandu, Moldova, Armenia and Tokyo, among others; we have expanded our visiting scholars program to include educators from South America; we collaborate regularly with ESUs in Russia and Romania on matters relating to Shakespeare; our current English in Action conversation students represent Poland, Turkey, Colombia, Indonesia, Bolivia, China, Korea, Brazil, Viet Nam and Laos. In these extremely unsettling times, our work of communicating both at home and abroad is more important than ever. Our common goal is understanding. Our common tool is English.

We wanted you to meet some "fruits of our labor" and have invited alumni and participants in several of our programs to be with us tonight. They represent our Treadwell British University Summer School Scholarships for American teachers; our English in Action program, which provides conversational English practice to newcomers to the country; our Luard scholarships, which provide a junior year in the U.K. for students from United Negro College Fund schools; our National Shakespeare Competition for American high school students; and our Secondary School Exchange program, which allows British and American teenagers to spend a post-high school year in each others' country. Could I ask these scholars to stand up now?

Even native English speakers need the occasional reminder about the diversity and breadth of our language. And with that in mind, we created a lecture series to explore its many aspects. Lady Thatcher's inaugural presentation focused on the political benefits of a shared language and shared values; last year, Sir John Bond talked about English as the common thread in international finance and business. Tonight Sir Martin Sorrell, CEO of WPP, will speak on what he knows best: communication.

And he has been doing a lot of communicating since he founded the WPP Group in 1986. Indeed, an Internet search for "Martin Sorrell" yields almost 13,000 results – articles, interviews, profiles. It's easy to see why he's known as "one of the most influential commentators in the industry." He knows how to say it and he knows how to sell it.

Sir Martin honed his skills at one of the world's most prestigious advertising agencies, Saatchi & Saatchi where, as Group Finance Director, he was instrumental in planning and implementing its international expansion. In 1986, he was ready to strike out on his own and acquired Wire & Plastic Products, a U.K.-based shopping cart manufacturer. Along the way, he engineered a stunning series of high-profile acquisitions, mergers and strategic alliances that took WPP from its relatively humble beginnings to the world's largest advertising and marketing group. Today, the global WPP Group encompasses 90 wholly-owned or affiliated operating companies that include such industry giants as the J. Walter Thompson, Ogilvy & Mather, Tempus, Young & Rubicam, and UniWorld Group advertising agencies; Hill & Knowlton, Burson-Marsteller and Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide, which constitute the public relations side of the business; and media investment management powerhouses MindShare and the Kantar Group. WPP provides a comprehensive and integrated range of communications services to national, multi-national and global clients that include more than 300 of the Fortune Global 500 and over half of the Nasdaq 100.

Sir Martin is both active and influential in his community and his industry, as evidenced by the long list of honors and appointments that you will find in your program. As an Oxford man myself, it's hard to swallow that a Cambridge graduate has attained such heights. He serves on the boards of business schools in the U.K., Spain, India and the U.S.; he is a patron of the arts, and a member of the Committee for the Special Olympics. He serves on the Nasdaq Board and was named to Advertising Age's Top 100 People of the 20th Century, a list whose primary criterion for inclusion was "shaping the course of advertising history."

Sir Martin's success lies in his greatest strength: strategic thinking. A hands-on manager, he knows how to isolate a client's needs, address them and solve them by calling upon an integrated matrix of resources within his own companies. He clearly understands that every client is not the same and that WPP cannot bring the same methods to every consumer market. The company constantly works on strategy and structure, experimenting with new approaches to client service and new ways of working. WPP strives to connect its employees, to keep them working cooperatively across organizational and national boundaries. And the way Sir Martin accomplishes that is through personal interaction and communication – ranging from all-day strategy sessions to his famous monthly emails.

Communication. It's what each one of us specializes in, in one way or another. I'm pleased to introduce to you now one of the most remarkable individuals in the field, who'll tell us exactly how he does it. Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming Sir Martin Sorrell.

SIR MARTIN SORRELL

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Language, Trade & Trust

Good evening ladies and gentlemen.

Thank you, William, for your generous introduction. Some might consider your account of my character and career flattering to the point of disbelief. However I am quite prepared to raise no strenuous objection.

To be invited here tonight by the English-Speaking Union is a special privilege. I choose my words with care. For quite apart from the distinction of my predecessors in these Margaret Thatcher Lectures, I take your invitation as welcome recognition that the vision and objectives of the E-SU are shared by my own company WPP and more broadly the industry in which I work. I for one certainly believe that to be true.

I am particularly struck by two aspects of the E-SU mission. These are, first, to promote “international understanding and human achievement”, and, second, a commitment to “the effective use of English in an expanding global community”.

Your organization has pursued its laudable aims with success for going on a century now. Moreover I need hardly comment on the renewed relevance of your humanitarian goals to the days we are living through now, and for the future of international relations in the months and years ahead.

I would also wish to claim, for my company at least, if not for the marketing community as a whole, adherence to remarkably similar principles ourselves.

True, we may not express our mission in quite the same terms as the E-SU. We are not, I must tell you, first and foremost a charitable organization. No doubt our shareholders will be relieved to hear it. More seriously, we stand or fall on our ability to win business, add value and make profits, for our clients and ourselves.

Does this put us at odds with the high ideals of the E-SU? Indeed it does not. For proof, let us ask ourselves this. In what kind of world will we marketers stand to gain the most? One that is driven by moral divides, cultural discontinuities and deepening mutual incomprehension?

Or the alternative possibility? A world characterized by fundamental values widely shared, in which each one of us is empowered to realize our potential for growth and prosperity.

The answer to my question lies both in common sense and in history. It is obvious, isn't it, that a world in harmony is very likely to create, produce, invest, market and consume more of almost every commodity you can think of (except perhaps bullets and bombs) than one in political and cultural disarray.

If in doubt, you merely have to look back fifteen years to the death throes of communism in Europe. As the walls came down, literally and metaphorically, that used to hide these failed states from our gaze, one misery among many that caught the attention of marketers was the sheer scale of the economic disasters which were revealed. Here were 20th century nations many of whose ordinary citizens could only dream of a visit to McDonalds. Cars and credit cards remained the stuff of fantasy.

Where the human spirit is crushed, economic strength and vigor inevitably suffer a similar fate.

The good news is of course that this cycle can be put into reverse. Nations and regions that are intimately conjoined by the complex ties of trading relations have a deep-rooted interest in peaceful coexistence. What's more, as anyone with any experience of international business will confirm, trading across frontiers unites the individuals concerned in common commercial interests and often leads to enduring personal friendship and cultural exchange.

This is why it is as a businessman as well as a private individual that I applaud the aims of the E-SU. Understanding and achievement are far more than merely desirable adjuncts to the main thrust of world commerce; they are essential to its sustainability.

But what about the "effective use of English in an expanding global community", that other element of your mission which caught my eye? What role does our language have to play in advancing human understanding and world trade - two goals that are closely connected and interdependent as I have suggested?

I'd like to begin by recalling just how powerful and ubiquitous the English language has become, not least in the business world where it is the undisputed *lingua franca* around the globe. The figures tell the story (and I quote from the E-SU's own statistics among others):

Today, English is spoken as a first language by some 377 million people. That's 6 percent or so of the world population. Only Chinese is more widespread.

English is an official second language in more than 70 countries.

And it is spoken as a non-official, foreign language by anything up to 750 million other people.

All in all, one-and-a-half billion or more individuals who can speak English to some degree. One quarter of the human race.

These figures give us a snapshot of the impressive stature of the English language in the world today. Here are some other interesting ones that bear on the future.

Right now, native English speakers are outnumbered by those for whom it is not their first language.

And there may be anything up to another 1 billion more who are learning English at any one time. Someone told me the other day that the number of Chinese currently studying the language is greater than the population of the United States.

That's an awful lot of new English speakers in the making.

When we look at that quintessentially 21st century phenomenon, the Internet, there too we see trends which appear to favor the onward march of English. For example, it is estimated by some that only about 30 percent of Internet users are native English speakers. As more regions get wired, that figure is likely to fall still further. Yet Internet content, as opposed to its users' first languages, is at least 70 percent English. Depending on how you measure it, probably much more.

Therefore the question here is, will the early predominance of English on the Net be sustained and indeed increased? You can argue that users now have even more reason to polish up their English. Something similar happened in the field of speech traffic over the telecommunications networks of the world. Let me quote my fellow WPP board member, Professor John Quelch, now at Harvard, who is a profound thinker on the evolution of English in business. He says:

“If there was not the ability for so many people in the world to communicate efficiently in a single language... there simply would not be the level of telecommunications traffic that has permitted costs to fall drastically - and for all the new innovations in terms of wireless technology and broadband to be justified.”

English as both the facilitator of communication and a catalyst for its technological advances.

On the other hand we can legitimately speculate whether the non-English-speaking populations will catch up over time, both in numbers and language preferences, to fuel the rise of a much more polyglot virtual world.

There is a case for this view. But meanwhile the jury is out on the virtual language of tomorrow's Internet. My own view is that the unique, intrinsic advantages of English as an international, intercultural communications tool mean that it will, at the very least, retain a widespread and significant role on the Net as in virtually all other channels.

But what *are* these virtues exclusively enjoyed by English?

This no place for an essay into comparative linguistics - and I am no expert. But one simple explanation of English's widespread adoption is: Little grammar, large vocabulary. More than any other language, English simultaneously offers the novice a huge choice of words together with exceptionally straightforward rules about how they can be assembled into some sort of meaning. English is in this sense the linguistic equivalent of the child's building block set with which even the toddler can soon learn to make meaningful shapes and express herself to others.

The important result of all this is that English is exceptionally easy to pick up. As John Quelch, whom I mentioned earlier, points out:

“If you can learn 1,000 words of English, you may be able to conduct yourself at a 90% level of

effectiveness. If you learn 1,000 words of German, you could probably only operate at a 40% level of effectiveness.”

If like me you travel a lot, you will certainly have experienced varying levels of effectiveness, sometimes at the expense of intelligibility. However, the remarkable reality is that in offices, factories, construction sites and conference halls from Azerbaijan to Zimbabwe - in groups where none of the speakers was born to the tongue - English is the familiar tool of everyday collaboration.

Ladies and gentlemen: English is a tool as I have said. And tools must be kept sharpened and in good repair. For that reason I simply cannot resist putting in a word or two about plain English.

I know that many of you have heard it all before, and no doubt will do so again. But I could hardly hope for a more receptive audience than yourselves for me to make yet another plea. So I will. It's a simple request after all:

Let us have words that say what they mean and mean what they say.

You may have several reactions to that. First, you might imagine that business would get this right. How can we expect to succeed if we cannot make ourselves understood?

Second, you may be tempted to point out that marketers and advertisers are accused of deliberately misusing words for their own ends.

I'll take the first point and start with a confession. Business people, including marketing communicators I have to admit, are among the most blatant offenders against the language.

No need, I am sure, to regale you with the horrors of corporate gobbledegook. The problem is compounded by the fact that, outside the media, we must be the most talkative industry on earth. Many of us are obliged to struggle through thickets of constipated corporate prose every day of the week. And we all too often take our revenge by churning out an unending stream of written, spoken, e-mailed, art directed, animated, jingled and sloganized verbiage ourselves.

Unfortunately, the contagion of convoluted English leaks into daily life as well. One of the well-known indirect casualties of war is, in heavy quotation marks, “collateral damage” inflicted on the language. Or to put it plainly:

Words get hurt.

This is not just pedants' corner either, I want to make that clear. Corruption of meaning heralds the erosion of trust. When we can no longer rely absolutely on the sense of the language we begin the slow withdrawal of belief in what we read and hear. And that process breeds the cynicism and disengagement from authority that is, I believe, one of the worst enemies of democracy.

Can we do anything, at least about the worst excesses of linguistic abuse? I believe that we can, and that we should.

We could begin our quest for clarity by asking, as my colleague Jeremy Bullmore recently did in one of our client Unilever's house publications, what exactly the professional obfuscators are up to:

"It is for us to decide:", says Jeremy. "Do they write like this because they are trying to communicate but failing?"

"Do they write like this because they don't care if they communicate or not?"

"Or do they write like this because they are determined not to communicate?"

Of these three possible explanations, one might well ask which is more alarming.

Whatever the answer, we should be under no illusion. The rolling fog of imprecision and ambiguity threatens to engulf us all. In troubled times especially, the urgent need is for the utmost simplicity and coherence.

What can we do? Two things, I believe:

First, we can resolve to set our own standards of verbal expression substantially higher. This of course can be extraordinarily hard to achieve.

You'll know that it was Winston Churchill, that master of the trenchant one-liner, who apologized to a correspondent for sending him or her a somewhat extended letter. The reason was, he apologized, "because I did not have the time to write you a short one". Seasoned writers will know exactly what Winston meant.

Closer to my own time and industry, is there - could there ever be - a more succinctly perfect statement of what all of us in the marketing business try to do, and of the consequences of failure, than David Ogilvy's immortal rallying cry?

"We sell, or else."

Four short words. Total understanding.

I suggested that there are two ways we can attempt to stem the avalanche of incomprehension. One, as I have indicated, is to raise our own writing game. Do-able, but undoubtedly a challenge to many.

The other remedy we have to hand is, in one sense, far simpler.

Just say No.

Say No to management-speak. No to impenetrable jargon. No the next time you are offered "transformational leadership", "conjunctural situations" or a "fluctuation margin".

Above all, say No to the notion that when confusion sets in, it is you whose grasp and intellect have

failed. Instead, remind yourself that the first duty of the communicator is to communicate.

That responsibility is widely shirked.

However, we can do our bit. We can ask speakers to explain in elementary terms what they have just said in complex ones. We can decline to plough through another opaque management tome. We can demand that the words we ourselves publish be edited and re-written until they make sense and are a pleasure to read. Above all, we can have the courage to say when we do not understand.

Let us all resolve to be the little boy or girl at the back who dares to ask the emperor the only question that really matters:

Please, what exactly do you mean?

I would now like to return to my earlier remarks on the current standing of the English language and explore, in the remaining minutes of this talk, the issue of trust in the spoken and written word.

We have seen that English occupies a pre-eminent position in the world and specifically in business. That is not new. The English language spread with the British empire, vectored by the trade winds of commerce to every corner of a globe that, little more than a century ago, was colored predominantly in imperial red.

As often as not, English came in peace. It spoke of benign colonialism, parliamentary government, commercial partnership and cultural enrichment. Its values were decent, humanitarian, democratic.

Since then of course its continued ascendancy has been supercharged by the combined political, economic and cultural influence of the United States, Britain and the English-speaking peoples in general.

Please forgive such a brutal summary. My point is that in the historical origins of the English-speaking diaspora lie the seeds of trouble. It starts with the word *empire*.

Not exactly the happiest word in these times.

I do not propose to go anywhere near the politics or morality of currently unfolding events. But it is impossible not to observe that many people - whole peoples indeed - now rightly or wrongly see imperialism on the march. Difficult then to celebrate English as a unifying global language when it is so widely regarded as the language of hegemony and aggression.

That is a relatively recent problem, but there's worse. Trust in the English language has been threatened for some time now by its association, not with imperial power, but with business, marketing and specifically globalization. Far from being the voice of decency and fair play, it is stridently alleged, English has allowed itself to become the lackey of ruthless commercialism. Its shameful role being to abuse its expressive and persuasive powers in order to lie and cheat for profit.

From the perspective of its critics, therefore, English as the voice of both political and commercial imperialism is now the one language it would be wise never to trust.

Once again I do not have time to do anything like full justice either to the accusation or its rebuttal. But I would like to clear up one important misconception that lies behind the charge, and then go on to suggest some part that we marketers can play in restoring the gloss to the reputation of the English language and the business it represents.

First, the misconception. To believe some commentators the entire panoply of marketing, branding and advertising is an elaborate conspiracy to bamboozle each one of us into parting with our hard-earned cash for things we do not really want or need.

Here's how it goes. Take a cheaply-acquired commodity. Add a little extra value and a lot of that insidious thing called The Brand. Then sell the resulting confection to the nearest unsuspecting innocent.

Now, the reality.

To get at the truth about marketing, we merely need to ask ourselves a simple question. In any reasonably free market economy, who wields the power: the consumer or the producer? The answer is that we almost always have an unfettered choice to buy or not to buy. And what to buy. This brand of butter or that one? Economy deal or quality at a price?

Decisions, decisions. But always our decisions.

And we are no fools. As that legendary adman David Ogilvy famously reminded his clients: "The consumer is not a moron. She is your wife."

Allowing for old-fashioned gender bias of course, David was, as so often, absolutely right. It is the seller, from a smallest trader in the souk to the loftiest multinational, who must find a way to secure our willing custom.

That is why the marketing profession can never be seriously interested in misrepresentation. Morality aside, it makes no commercial sense. We are advocates for our clients. Our job is to present the case for our clients' goods and services. We cannot hope to do that without enjoying our audience's trust.

And so we come to the final word in the title of my talk tonight.

As I hope I have established already, trustworthiness has always been an indispensable quality for the professions whose task it is to advocate products that their clients sell. Or at least for those that wish to prosper over the long term. (There will always be the snake-oil merchants, however tightly we regulate.)

The same is true for brands. We each bring a wealth of knowledge, opinions, prejudices and desires to them. Just think for a moment how you know without hesitation what you can and cannot expect from a Buick or a Bentley, Wal-Mart or Tiffany. But at the core of each of these clusters of perceptions must reside one thing in common: trust.

We need to be certain beyond doubt that the brands we are offered really are what they say they are, do what they say they do. Without that foundation of trust, nothing that any brand claims for itself can be credible. And we - who are not morons, remember - simply won't buy it.

How then can businesses and the marketers who serve them re-dedicate their efforts to the consolidation of trust for themselves and their brands? The question is now more urgent than ever, faced as we are with the rise of anti-Western, anti-capitalist sentiments inflamed by war.

I believe that we would do well to look at four avenues, three of which I have touched on tonight:

First: we can pay renewed attention to how we as businesses and organizations act as corporate citizens both within our immediate communities and on the world stage. Consumers - and still more, the media - are increasingly alert to what they judge to be bad corporate behavior. Professional probity is of course primarily a matter of moral values. But it also makes for pretty good strategy.

As JWT's Richard Block has said: "It is now in the commercial interests of most companies to be ahead of the ethical curve".

Second: we can do our best to guard against the damage to the English language inflicted by corporate guru-speak. We may all enjoy sniggering at the latest examples of pretentious verbal nonsense, but the underlying issue is a serious one. A rising tide of expert incomprehensibility threatens to diminish the worth of all our communications.

Third: as an industry we must do a lot more to educate and inform. The greater the understanding we can foster about the techniques and disciplines of our profession, the less people will be inclined to regard us as ill-intentioned illusionists with a mission to deceive.

If these three proposals call for the marketing industry to act in some respects as the conscience of its clients and drivers for more ethical behavior, then so be it. That is a responsibility I strongly believe we should accept.

Finally, and perhaps a trifle uneasily in front of an E-SU audience, I would like to examine briefly the merits of not speaking English.

English, as we have seen, has long enjoyed powerful intrinsic and historical advantages as the language of international business. More than that, it carries with it a promise of humane values and democratic freedoms. It will undoubtedly continue to do so, for generations to come.

But a counter-current is beginning to run in the opposite direction - one that tugs at English's dominance and ubiquity. As non-native English speakers grow in numbers and self-confidence they are demanding to be addressed in their own languages and with reference to their own cultures. Nationalism, separatism and anti-Western sentiment also play their part.

Do these developments foretell the demise of English as a trusted trading language? Hardly. But it seems clear to me that restoring trust in business, brands and marketing must in future entail accepting and celebrating linguistic diversity.

Here, I would claim, we marketers are well placed to show the way forward. The nature of our business requires that we be skilled at adapting to the sensitivities of our customers, linguistic and otherwise. We know that success depends on it. Sometimes that means allowing for diverse cultural differences and

localizing the contents of our communications accordingly. More and more, it will involve eschewing English in favor of local languages.

We must understand that there is a time and place for the English language, and a time and place for our audiences' mother tongues.

I could go on - this is a large and fascinating topic. But as I have just suggested, sometimes the art of successful communication resides in knowing precisely when to stop.

Thank you.