

A Language of Safe Words

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We can hear a sentence, understand every word in the sentence, and still not actually understand the sentence. Not completely, at least. Take this one:

The safe word is red.

To anyone who is in a situation where this kind of sentence comes up, it is extremely important to know exactly what it means. And its purpose seems simple enough. It names the safe word, doesn't it? Probably it does. But it might do other things. It might be *describing* the safe word, implying that the word refers to something with a certain red quality. Perhaps it is part of a game wherein the listener has to guess what the word is. (Blood? lobster? etc.) Perhaps it is *declaring* the word "red" safe from what's about to proceed; the listener may use any *other* word in whatever way desired, just not "red."

Of course, these would be strange and artificial things to do with that sentence. But having a safe word is already an artificial practice. It signals that people are about to use words in a new way. A safe word does not literally keep anyone safe.

If the sentence "The safe word is red" is to carry any weight, the speaker must say it in good faith. By "good faith," I mean here the ideal of freedom from influence, the notion that the listener is not being pulled in any

particular direction that is not indicated by the overt content of the sentence.

Moreover, the listener must trust that the speaker is speaking in good faith. The listener must take the sentence at face value. (Looking for other possible meanings of the sentence would count as an act of bad faith on the listener's part.) That trust can never be secured with another sentence. Even something as simple as "You can trust me or I am acting in good faith" can be meant, or taken, in any number of ways. To fully secure our trust without any good faith whatsoever, a sentence would have to be perfectly transparent. No such sentence exists.

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Language has an opacity to it. It can fail us when we need it most. One example of this occurs with extreme physical pain. Elaine Scarry has argued that our pain is utterly specific and real in a way that requires no words, but in order to make our pain specific to others we have to speak figuratively about it, as in "My skin is on fire."

Another example of it occurs with disputes between lovers. When romantic partners argue, words take on strange properties. Witness the opening lines of a story by Lydia Davis entitled "Disagreement":

He said she was disagreeing with him. She said no, that was not true, he was disagreeing with her.¹

To anyone who has gotten mired in a petty argument with a partner, the sentiment behind these words is clear. But the words make no sense. If *she* is disagreeing with *him*, then *he must be* disagreeing with *her*. This is what it means to "disagree:" the word simply designates a mismatch between two positions. A relation of disagreement, by definition, must be reciprocal.

The rub lies in both parties using the word "disagree" to assign agency or blame. One or the other party is somehow *being disagreeable*. Now it is *she* (or he) who has created the disagreement, and it is up to *her* (or him) to remedy it.

When arguments like this happen between lovers, they tend to feel intensely personal and painful. What's at stake does not lie in the words themselves but in the good faith that supports the words. People who are

supposed to love each other now find themselves speaking in ways that try to manipulate language to their advantage. The couple are speaking in what Charles Baxter has called, in reference to this story, “[t]he language of contract law, of hair-splitting, of intelligence generally at its wit’s end.”²

Davis’s ear is uncannily attuned to the opacities of language, and to the attitudes of people who think that they can be saved by eliminating those opacities.

There is something perversely funny about these arguments. On the one hand, everything seems to change with a slight shift of emphasis (if we shift the blame, we shift the whole nature of the argument); on the other hand, these arguments never go anywhere (if we can shift the blame this easily, we obviously won’t resolve anything).

There is another perversely funny example of a couple using language that animates the same basic principle, albeit in exactly the opposite way. It is the contract negotiation scene in *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Sam Taylor-Johnson, 2015), where the matters of a relationship become explicitly legal.

Ana meets Christian to discuss the terms of the dom/sub document he has given her. She has insisted that, since this is a business meeting, it should be held in a place of business. So the couple sit at a conference table in his office, to discuss the finer points of suspension and fisting.

The scene goes for some easy laughs, like the “What are butt plugs?” line. But there’s a quieter comic irony at work here. These characters are having fun with each other. Oddly, this is when Ana and Christian feel most like a real couple.

That it takes a sex contract for this to happen gives the situation a screwball-comedy energy, albeit with a twist. For classical Hollywood screwball films like *The Awful Truth* (Leo McCarey, 1937) and *Adam’s Rib* (George Cukor, 1949) marriage was a battleground. The central couple had to prove that they belonged together through their mutual skill in sparring. Ana and Christian have none of the wit of Grant and Dunne or Hepburn and Tracy. So their fun consists of using the language of contract law for its intended purpose: getting rid of ambiguities. The key point is their exchange about suspension:

Ana: Also on page five, there are some terms that need clarification. Suspension?

Christian: Hanging on ropes from the ceiling.

Ana: For what possible reason?

Christian: For your pleasure.

Ana: Really.

Christian: And mine. Something to consider.

Ana: No. Hard limit.

Ana asks for clarification on the term: Christian clarifies it: Ana decides whether or not to accept it: they move on. The language could have gone awry in any number of ways. Christian gives a slightly ambiguous answer in “For your pleasure”, but when pressed, he does not try to argue the point. He does not try to sell her on the idea by claiming, for instance, that it’s like flying. She declares a hard limit, and the matter is not brought up again. Language hums along perfectly. The characters are negotiating in good faith.

In this moment, the delicate matter of what partners want from each other becomes absurdly clear. That clarity is essential to the sex scenes as well, and it’s a major part of what makes them sexy. Christian keeps stopping to ask Ana “Does that hurt?” or, “Do you want more?” What’s erotic about dialogue like this, and about clear communication more generally, is its candor. A partner who is candid is a partner who is vulnerable. Thoughts and cares are denuded of pretension or evasion.

We even wonder, or at least I do, why these two people have safe words in the first place, since they speak so literally in bed. In fact, they speak like this throughout the entire film. (In fact, they have two safe words: red for a hard limit, yellow for a soft.) Regardless of the setting, Ana and Christian seem incapable of saying anything other than what they are thinking. They don’t flirt. They just report things.

There is Christian’s notoriously direct line “I don’t make love. I fuck. Hard.”, but it hardly comes from a different place than his similarly awkward “I’d like to bite that lip” in an earlier scene. Or, when the couple try to banter, they come off as if still learning how subtlety and irony in

language are supposed to work. (Witness their repeated “Later, baby” sendoff line.)

At the conference table, clear and literal language sounds refreshingly honest. In the toy room, it sounds exciting. In a restaurant, it sounds like something a chatbot would say. (Related to this: Christian’s way of speaking keeps undermining the film’s attempts to depict him as dark and mysterious. If he exercises control in all things, why does he give in so quickly to Ana’s demands when they negotiate the contract? Is this how he always does business? If so, how does he make any money?)

Campy dialogue rarely has any opacity. Because of this, it often sounds like the author has failed the language.

Lydia Davis is celebrated by critics to the degree that she wields control over the kinds of sentences that trap her characters. Any thrill that we get from the writing lies entirely in the prose. E.L. James has none of this ear for complexity. She seems to think *with* her characters, rather than about them. To that degree she is mocked. The *Fifty Shades* film doesn’t include Ana’s infamous *Oh my* narration, but the dialogue is still of that voice. These characters seem to be exactly what they appear to be.

But because of this, James’s characters seem to genuinely achieve, at least in the contract scene, what Davis’s characters can only dream of. *Fifty Shades* is about fantasies of many kinds, but one especially potent fantasy it offers, one that is easy to miss, is the fantasy of perfectly transparent communication.

The power of this fantasy should not be underestimated. It animates, in negative form, just about any story about a relationship whose failure is grounded in confusion or obfuscation. We find it over and over, in the works of Eric Rohmer, Jean-Luc Godard, and Hong Sang-soo. The words in *Fifty Shades* feel like they belong on title cards, as in a silent movie, so that they can get out of their own way as quickly as possible. The dialogue seems naïve enough to believe in a world where lovers can really know each other, where there is no misunderstanding.

When spoken aloud, this fantasy cannot help but be funny, because it requires that its characters be as transparent as its dialogue. When we notice things that the film or the characters seem to miss, the result is camp. Even the contract scene falls apart at the end, when Ana and Christian try to banter over why Ana's face is red. She says it's the wine. He says it's her desire. But no one acknowledges that, thanks to the bizarre lighting of the space, everything in the room is red. Do they not see that? Who talks like this?

All this doesn't necessarily mean that the movie is dumb about how inadequate its fantasy is. Even as the movie invites that fantasy of good faith through Christian's words, it keeps undermining that fantasy through his actions. On this point, the central drama of the film—whether or not Ana will sign the sub/dom contract—has already been decided, albeit without Ana's knowledge. Early in the film, Christian buys Ana a new laptop and has it delivered to her door. Ana does not exactly know what's going on when the delivery comes, and simply signs for it anyway. Her signature is filmed in a close-up, the significance of which is not apparent until later in the film, as their manner of speaking and his patterns of behavior unfold. She has already signed up for the relationship, because he has engineered the circumstances such that she would do so.

This idea, that Christian can effectively induce Ana into consent while outwardly proclaiming his good faith, comes to a head at the film's climactic whipping scene. The climax is unpleasant to watch in a way that we're unprepared for. Campy movies allow their audiences to remain safe while their characters are in danger. But when Christian gets Ana's permission to whip her without mercy or eroticism, it feels strangely personal, as if the film has gone back on its earlier promise of remaining simple and literal and fun.

Safe words are necessary when the limits of bodies are being tested, because our bodies, as much as our words, can be opaque to us. We can be surprised at what our bodies can do and feel, but the surprise itself can be good or bad. How can we knowingly submit to unknown pleasures? The safe word is a way of stating "I want you to teach me new things about my body, except for those things I don't want to know, and I don't know what either of those are yet."

When Christian hits Ana without checking up on her, instead making her count off strikes with him, as if to make her complicit with the act, he is telling her something about himself that he does not want her to know by telling her things about her body that she does not want herself to know.

Christian obeys the letter of their verbal agreement: she has asked him to do his worst, without knowing what that means. He even reminds her, before he starts, that she can stop it at any time. Yet he betrays the good faith that makes their agreement possible: he shifts the responsibility for his actions on to her words, with an unspoken You asked for it. An agreement cannot enforce itself, and a safe word is only a word.

Ana's new pain, in the face of which she can only give a refusal when it's already too late (she says "No—don't fucking touch me" after Christian has finished the lashings and is trying to comfort her; the next morning she says "No, stop" when he is trying to follow her into the elevator as she is leaving) is not a pain solely of the body, but it is a pain that only the body can bring about. It makes clear in an unexpected and frightening way how vulnerable she is. (A behind-the-scenes story of the film involves this "No, stop" line. Director Taylor-Johnson wanted to change the line to the couple's hard-limit safe word, *red*, author James fought to keep the line literal. It seems to me that James is in the right. There is nothing to hold the safe word up, and Ana has no choice but to be as direct as possible.)

There is a sentence in a story from Lydia Davis's most recent collection, *Can't and Won't*, that feels profoundly out of place in her work. The story is "The Seals." It concerns a woman dealing with the death of her sister. The sentence is:

I miss her so much.³

It's those last two words that stand out. So xyz phrases are notoriously imprecise. They suggest that some kind of consequence or comparison is about to be made (*I miss her so much that...*, *I miss her as much as...*), but the suggestion is never completed and the phrase just floats there. Why does Davis, so attuned to subtleties of language, do this? What is her narrator up to?

The narrator likes this phrase enough to repeat it, nearly verbatim, a page later, saying *I missed her so much*.⁴ This time, the phrase doesn't even refer to the same pain of grief. Instead, it indicates how the narrator felt when her sister was still alive and they could still see each other. The feeling behind the latter, *I missed her so much*, pales in comparison to the feeling behind the former, *I miss her so much*. The difference between the two is that between life and death. Yet the narrator makes no distinction between them, except in verb tense. It seems that she feels no need to be more specific than this.

What's surprising here, in the context of Davis's work, is how the narrator is limited by her language but does not seem to be trapped by it. She accepts it and makes a modest home within it. It is precisely this kind of attitude that defines the narrator's relation to her sister, whom the narrator loved dearly but never knew very well.

I miss her so much speaks from a point of reconciliation with, even a confidence in, the limits of words. It does not try to articulate its pain. It merely asserts the existence of it and admits the gap between it and others. The rest is out of its control.

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Notes

- 1 Lydia Davis, "Disagreement," in *Almost No Memory: Stories* (New York: Picador, 1997), 67.
- 2 Charles Baxter, "Against Epiphanies," in *Burning Down the House: Essays on Fiction: Expanded Edition* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf, 2008), 57.

- 3 Lydia Davis, "The Seals," in *Can't and Won't* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 247.
- 4 Davis, "The Seals," 248.