

I don't have the greatest vocabulary in the world. As a student I shared a house for a year with a Danish girl who was in Scotland to improve her English. She would wander into my room and ask what the difference was between such words as 'personable' and 'amiable' as her dictionary definition didn't quite help. I just used to look at her dumbly and wonder why they had sent me this intellectual instead of the akvavit-drinking party animal I had hoped for.

Readers familiar with this column will know that I rarely use words of more than two syllables (oops there's one). I might not come across as a great intellect, but I hope people understand what I am saying.

I once heard Stephen Fry described as the stupid person's idea of what a clever person is. Now I have to admit to being a wee bit prejudiced against the pompous git, but that description appeals to me. Nothing annoys me more than someone trying to show off by using words that most of us cannot hope to understand. I'm not sure what it is that they think they are achieving with their long words and Latin references, apart from trying to exclude those of us without the benefit of a public school education.

Of course language is used deliberately to exclude others – most teenagers use words and phrases that exclude any over the age of twenty as a way of separating themselves from a different generation. Your use of the words hot, groovy, wicked, wack and most excellent will give a fairly good idea of the age and type of person you are. Woe betide the middle-aged dad who tries to talk to his kids in their own language.

I'm not calling for our language to be dumbed down; only that people use the most appropriate words and not just the one they think is the cleverest. The best communicators are those who are able to tailor their words to their audience, not those

who send us away feeling confused or patronized. I don't mind working hard at a bit of poetry or when reading a technical document. Shades of meaning are important then – I'd hate for my doctor to confuse a cold with swine flu.

What really gets me, though, is when words are introduced in order to cover up their true meaning: to soften and make the unacceptable acceptable. I'm talking about rendition flights, insurgents and enhanced interrogation techniques. Do the people responsible think we do not realise they are talking about torture and guerrillas? When they talk about ethnic cleansing they really mean mass murder, marginalize means kill. Do they really think we are so intellectually challenged?

Redaction (which isn't even in my dictionary) is another word for censorship. I wonder if our leaders think that we will not mind that they are hiding the details of their spending from us if they call it something that might not mean deceit or cover-up.

There was a Polish politician on the radio who was discussing civil partnerships in the European Union, and one of the local journalists challenged him. Apparently the word he was using for homosexual has an offensive meaning. This is another way to use euphemisms – to express prejudices intentional or otherwise. Expressions such as 'our coloured friends' or even, dare I say it, 'tourists' and 'incomers' pretend to be inoffensive but very often are used in a derogatory way.

One of my favourite quotes comes from Quentin Crisp; "Euphemisms are unpleasant truths wearing diplomatic cologne." He might be a confirmed bachelor but the man had a point.