

Please read the following book review and answer the following three questions.

"Mother," asks 10-year-old Johnny upon returning from school, "do I have a cliché on my face?"

"A cliché on your face? Whatever do you mean, Johnny?"

"A cliché," he answers, "you know, a tired expression."

Johnny nailed it: Clichés are tired expressions. Their fatigue comes from their having been overused, and often badly used. They are words and phrases that no longer carry much meaning and have even less force. They reveal mental laziness on the part of those who use them. They are despoilers of style. 1) Using clichés is like dressing out of the dirty-laundry bag—someone else's dirty-laundry bag.

Who is to say what is a cliché? Some clichés are obvious, of course, like throwing that baby out with the bathwater or watching someone like a hawk. But others are in doubt. Has "boots on the ground" now achieved cliché status? 2) Has "go-to guy" arrived there? And what about "take," as in "what's your take on the subject?" 3) Until recently, a cliché was what arbiters of language claimed it was, and, being arbiters, they could sometimes be arbitrary.

This has now changed, owing to modern computational lexicography, which allows linguists to gather statistical evidence on how frequently words and phrases are used, and in what combinations, and by whom, and in what settings. Overuse alone does not always mark a cliché. According to Orin Hargraves, a lecturer in linguistics who works on computational analysis of language at the University of Colorado, "It is often misapplication, rather than frequency of application, that leads to the perception of a phrase as a cliché." In *It's Been Said Before*, Hargraves sets out as his criteria for clichés that they are frequent, often used without regard to their appropriateness, and they may give a general or inaccurate impression of an idea that could often benefit by being stated more succinctly, clearly, or specifically—or in some cases, by not being stated at all.

In regards to the cliché "the elephant in the room," he writes: 4) "Elephants in rooms outnumber elephants in Africa by nearly twenty to one." Let us forget that "800-pound gorilla," which, if found in the same room with one of those elephants, can make for a densely packed room and provide serious housekeeping problems. Of "meteoric rise," he notes, with astronomy on his side, that meteors usually fall.

Clichés can, of course, be clever, and some contain a fairly high truth quotient. Many clichés began life as dazzling metaphors or scintillating similes. 5) The Bible and Shakespeare, an old joke has it, are magnificent, but contain way too many clichés. Clichés can also be useful for spinning off, reversing, and doubling back on, for comic results. 6) Maurice Bowra once remarked that an overly friendly Oxford don had given him "the warm shoulder." 7) I have been known sometimes to introduce my wife as my "better three quarters."

Orin Hargraves is, by self-designation, a "cliché-killer," out to divest the English language of as many clichés as possible by highlighting their illogic and ridiculing their stupidity. Excellent cliché hitman though he is, he realizes that the job cannot be done with anything like thoroughness and that most clichés will live on; he even believes that some clichés deserve to do so, if only because they can put people at ease by their informality and familiarity. 8) "None of these judicious uses of cliché," he writes, "if kept in check, is objectionable." He distinguishes between clichés and proverbs, and he does not regard as clichés those idioms that do the job of precise expression more economically than lengthier phrasing, among them "shed light," "leaps and bounds," and "part and parcel." His larger intention here is to bring about a greater awareness of the inanity of most clichés and to point out "the detriment that they typically represent to effective communication."

The great swamp in which clichés nest is journalism, which, Hargraves writes, “has been historically and continues to be the true home of the cliché.” As such, journalists are also the great vectors, or spreaders, of cliché. If anything, more clichés show up in contemporary journalism than ever before because of the increased absence at budget-restricted newspapers of that necessary drudge, the copy editor. Hargraves also finds the blogosphere to be “particularly rich in cliché today,” and for the same reason: want of editing. He doesn’t mention the Twitterverse, but given its need for quick and clipped communication, 9) clichés to the tweeter are, as one might have said before reading Hargraves’s book, as meat and drink.

Hargraves writes that “tipping points first came to light in considerable numbers in the 1960s and today people and situations reach them all the time,” adding that before the phrase came into vogue, “there were more straws breaking camels’ backs.” The word “outliers” is another vogue word headed on its way to the unhappy hunting ground of cliché country. Many such vogue words—which are really little more than new clichés—have been loosed upon the world through the books of the journalist-sociologist Malcolm Gladwell.

Outside the ken of *It’s Been Said Before* is the role that clichés play beyond the written or spoken word. Clichés directly affecting life also exist, exerting genuine pressure on people and often determining crucial decisions for them. One such cliché is “reinventing oneself.” It suggests that one’s life can fairly easily be changed, quickly rendering one a new and happier person, as if human character were so plastic, so malleable.

10) Hargraves is neither a belletrist nor a language curmudgeon. Not the least wisp of snobbery clings to his pages. He does not set out to reform the English language and its use. What he intends, he tells us in his final chapter, is to call to the attention of interested readers and writers the need to excise from prose those deposits of stale language that come in the form of clichés and that block, if they do not sometimes befuddle, clear communication. He wants his readers to “write mindfully”—mindful, that is, of when their own language is precise and lively and when wobbly and deadening.

Questions:

1. Explain the TEN underlined phrases or sentences. (30%)
2. Condense the article into FIVE concise paragraphs with clear topic sentences. (40%)
3. What role do clichés play in translation or oral interpreting? Use examples, English or Chinese, to illustrate your points. (30%)

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