

**I D E A S**

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# **PLASTIC WORDS**

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**Lister Sinclair**

I'm Lister Sinclair, and this is *Ideas* about "plastic words."

Here are three quite ordinary sentences, sentences which would not seem out of place in a politician's speech, a consultant's report or a daily newspaper. Sentence one: "Progress in educational planning will depend on a restructured process of communication." Sentence two: "Current models of development are not addressing pressing information needs." Sentence three: "Social adjustment depends on a secure sexual identity."

Each of these seemingly innocent and unremarkable utterances is composed of what German scholar Uwe Pörksen calls "plastic words." *Information, communication, structure, identity, process, model, development, and needs* are all examples of this modern and increasingly international code.

Uwe Pörksen is a linguist, a medievalist, a novelist, and a professor at the old University of Freiburg in southwestern Germany. In 1988, he published a book called *Plastikwörter: Die Sprache einer Internationalen Diktatur—Plastic Words: The Language of an International Dictatorship*. Plastic words, according to Professor Pörksen, are words of colloquial origin which have been taken up by some branch of science or expert knowledge and then returned to everyday speech, with new connotations. *Information*, for example, is an old English word. Not more than fifty years ago it began to be used as a term in communication theory, where it signifies that property of a signal or message which can be distinguished from noise and measured in bits. In ordinary speech, it now has a scientific aura, without denoting anything precise.

In a similar way, words like *structure* and *role* have made a round trip from the vernacular into sociology and back. *Sexuality* and *identity* have journeyed through psychoanalysis, and *development* through biology. These words then spread into every corner of the language, displacing synonyms, overshadowing more homely terms, and seducing speakers with their shimmer of scientific prestige. When people use these words, Pörksen says, they unwittingly turn themselves into clients of those who actually know what the words mean and, at the same time, their own power to say what they mean is reduced.

On this edition of *Ideas*, we explore Uwe Pörksen's conception of plastic words. The program is written and presented by David Cayley.

**David Cayley**

In 1875, in a book called *Untimely Meditations*, Friedrich Nietzsche wrote a short passage about what he called "the madness of general concepts." This passage anticipates at least the outline of Uwe Pörksen's theory of plastic words and, in his book, Pörksen quotes it in full.

"Everywhere," Nietzsche says, "language has fallen ill." He believes this sickness to be a consequence of the overweening ambition of modern science, using that term in its broad sense. "In order to grasp the domains of thought," Nietzsche says, language has been forced "to climb to the highest level it could reach" and, in this ambitious reach for an increased power of generalization and abstraction, it has suffered a proportional loss in vividness, concreteness, and direct correspondence with our experience. "In the short space of contemporary civilization," he says, "the strength of language has been exhausted by this excessive effort," with the result that language can no longer express the simple joys and sorrows of suffering people. "Language," he goes on, "has everywhere become a power unto itself, which now grabs the people with ghostly arms and forces them into places where they don't even want to go. As soon as they try to understand one another and come to some agreement, they are seized by the madness of general concepts." "Man is no longer recognizable in language," he concludes, because language no longer corresponds to his "actual troubles," but only to "the hollowness of those tyrannical words and concepts."

This passage stands alone in the essay in which it appears, a brief sketch without further elaboration; but, like so much of Nietzsche, it is strangely clairvoyant. What he had to strain to see—he speaks of a condition "only dimly intuited"—we would now have to strain to overlook—a murky, inept, and refractory language.

Uwe Pörksen tries to analyze this condition with his concept of *plastic words*. Plastic words embody the ambition Nietzsche speaks of, to climb to the highest level of abstraction. The term *development*, for example, when applied to whole societies, refers to a process of total transformation without limit; there is nothing that cannot be

developed, and nothing, consequently, which is not development. Such words, Pörksen believes, spread like an oil slick, covering the whole field of their application with a thin film of connotations, and the more they spread the more diffuse their meaning becomes.

Plastic words, Pörksen says, are without form, taste, or texture; they evoke no particular place, no particular history. Like the substance for which they are named, they are both malleable and inert. And they have two great effects. The first is that they turn society into a laboratory, by mandating a state of permanent change and authorizing the hegemony of the experts and professionals who will direct this change. Words like *role*, *model*, *factor* and *trend*, all on Pörksen's list, are like molds in which society and persons are again and again reshaped, taking on new *roles*, adopting new *models*, following new *trends*.

The second great effect is that they overshadow ordinary intercourse and the ordinary words on which it depends. Beside these imperious and universal constructs, simply to live, or simply to speak, without any intention of altering or improving what one speaks about, seems paltry and perhaps a little irresponsible—shouldn't we after all be "communicating," getting to grips with our "sexuality," assessing our "needs," adapting to current "trends," or whatever it may be?

I've been fascinated by Uwe Pörksen's theory of plastic words since I first heard of it. I've read his book in an unpublished translation, and his approach seems to me much more helpful and more analytically pointed than what is usually called "language criticism" and often amounts to little more than hectoring people about their careless disregard for the grammatical rules and syntactical niceties cherished by the critics.

Recently, I met with Uwe Pörksen at the home of historian Barbara Duden in the northern German city of Bremen. There we recorded the interview from which this program is taken. He began by telling me where the idea of plastic words originated: in a conversation with his friend Ivan Illich.

#### **Uwe Pörksen**

We spent one year at the same place, at the Wissenschaftskolleg, Institute for Advanced Studies, in Berlin. He was very much interested in some essays I had written on history of language of science. I had written an

essay on the language of Linnaeus and Goethe, of Darwin, and Freud. What interested me in these essays was how these writers took words of colloquial origin, gave them in their scientific context a special scientific meaning, and how those words then shifted back into colloquial language.

And there they had an enormous career. They worked like keys, like key words, for many spheres. For example, they had a political career. Darwin's key words, "struggle for life," "natural selection," had a dangerous career, particularly in Germany. But it's also very interesting to observe how expressions which Freud coined in his scientific context have shifted and changed and developed in common speech.

And Ivan asked me: Couldn't you draw the line into the present? Let us speak about this phenomenon in the last two or three decades. How do words work in our time which were also taken from colloquial language, coined by science, and then returned.

#### **David Cayley**

Pörksen undertook this investigation reluctantly. "Describing the disabling of the vernacular," he says in the introduction to his book, "has something depressing about it. It has not always been possible to approach it without breaking into a sweat and feeling dizzy."

Still, he pondered this "terrible theme," as he called it, and one of the things he noticed was the way in which plastic words were making possible the unwelcome transformation of his beloved city of Freiburg and the old wine-growing region which surrounds it. The nearly nine-hundred-year-old city of Freiburg was then being developed, and wine production in its vicinity rationalized, under the aegis of a document entitled "Blueprint for a Plan of Space Utilization."

Pörksen observed how words like *structure*, *service*, and *system* worked, like a potter preparing clay, to soften up the existing reality of the city and make it workable. The vocabulary of planning, he noted, deprived things of their particularity, their suchness, and moved them into a homogeneous and universal space, where they could be more easily manipulated.

And there were other incidents which convinced him of the power of plastic words, like a meeting he attended in the little mountain city of Tepotzlan, in Mexico.

**Uwe Pörksen**

I was not very good in Spanish, and they were talking about developing their country. And it was so easy to understand what they said because there were only ten, fifteen words which recurred, which were repeated: *modernización, proceso, progreso, la crisis, estructura, sistema*, and so on—just the words which I was concerned with. So I thought, this is the basic code of these people and marks the lines which they will follow in future. It is dangerous.

Another thing that happened was that I found some newspapers which an uncle of mine, the brother of my father, had gathered in the thirties, during the Nazi time. He lived in a city which I knew very well, and he had cut out articles and gathered them. What I read there seemed like a net which had lain above the heads of the city. It was very strange because there was no connection between what we regard as the reality of 1934 or 1935 and the description of it in the papers of that time. So then I thought, maybe we are living in a very similar way in a cloud of words which determines our consciousness and we don't notice it.

The Nazi time is an example for me that people follow language, *paroles*, slogans—an idiotic interpretation of the word, which only exists because there exists this net, these nodal points of key words which explain history and the present day for them.

**David Cayley**

Pörksen's conviction about the power of language grew and he became more and more convinced that the words he was studying, immigrants from science into everyday speech, constituted a distinct and definable class. They were not slogans, buzz-words, jargon, or any of the other more obvious manifestations of modern verbal inflation, but something less obtrusive. The latest vogue word is noticed, and often loudly denounced. Jargon, for example, is a favourite *bête-noir* even of those who use it; but *needs, sexuality, or values* settle comfortably into the background of contemporary talk, where they are hardly noticed.

So Pörksen took on the task of defining this phenomenon of plastic words, both more elusive and more pervasive than most previous language critics had noticed.

**Uwe Pörksen**

I tried to classify those words in a very systematic way, a very German way perhaps. I tried to find criteria by which I could describe those words. How could I make what we call "*Phantombilder*," "*Suchbilder*"? If you want to find a criminal, you draw a *Phantombild*—I don't know the English word for that.

**David Cayley**

A composite image.

**Uwe Pörksen**

A composite image—that was what I tried to draw. And, you know, at first, I didn't know, how could I describe this type of words which, as it seemed to me, was like a new code, a set of I didn't know how many words which are used in a very special way in our colloquial language, words like *communication, energy, sexuality, information, modernization, Entwicklung*—that is, *development*. And then suddenly I had the idea just to draw this composite image and, at point after point, to try to say that they have some features by which they can be isolated. They derive from science, for example; they are very abstract; they have a large content, a large field of meaning. *Sexuality*, for example, is very strange because it can be used for so many forms of relation. One year ago, one of our famous scientists in Germany, the president of the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*, said, "Language is the sexuality of human culture." It's a sort of nonsense, [chuckling] but it's possible to say that and people think they understand something. So, these were some of the features. I tried to work these out, and at last I had thirty of those criteria.

**David Cayley**

One of these criteria is that plastic words have a wide power of connotation and no precise power of denotation whatever. "Denotation" here refers to what a word actually designates, "connotation" to all the feelings and associations it evokes. Plastic words, as Ivan Illich has put it, "make waves, but they don't actually hit anything." Pörksen develops the point at length in his book, choosing one key word from what, at the time he wrote, was West Germany, and one from the East.

**Uwe Pörksen**

I tried to analyze the word *Entwicklung, development*, as it was used in the DDR, in Eastern Germany, which at that time was a state for itself, as you know. I got many papers and texts from there, and sometimes I also visited the little

city Weimar. I made many observations, and I observed that it was a word which was used in *any* context. I remember once I visited a museum in Weimar, and within two sentences this word was used five times. It was like a grunt: it said nearly nothing; it only said, movement which goes from down to upstairs —no more—a nearly void sense, but it had a large connotation. It was a very positive word; it was acceptable by everyone. It had to be accepted.

It was also a word which was very usable in a *Diktatur*, because everyone who didn't accept development was an enemy of the state. I compared my description of this word with my description of *sexuality* in Western Germany, and the surprising result was that the main features of the description were the same.

### **David Cayley**

So you could repeat the sentence of the president of the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* and say, "Development is the sexuality of the DDR." [laughing]

### **Uwe Pörksen**

[laughing] Yes, you are right. I could have used that example.

### **David Cayley**

You spoke about your earlier studies of how words came out of colloquial speech into science and back again. As you began to have a more precise definition of the class of plastic words, what did you come to see as the implications of this journey through science? What does it do to the person who uses the word?

### **Uwe Pörksen**

As a linguist, one would say, if I use a word of our colloquial language, I can use it in several meanings. If I use the word *love*, or *friendship*, in one context it will mean this; in another context, perhaps it will have a little bit different meaning. When I apply a word like *sexuality* to myself—"I haven't come to terms with my sexuality," for example—I use a word which is like a building block, a building block which is nearly a stereotype. And this word implies that there is a sphere where there are experts whom I can ask, what is going on with me?

The same is true if you use *development*. For example, in Eastern Germany at that time, there was a group of experts who had defined what development is and had to be. I think this is one of the criteria for these words. In

colloquial speech I lose the power of definition; it is defined at another place, this word, and I lose the power of giving different meanings or adding nuance and shadows to the word.

### **David Cayley**

And as well as losing the power to define what I mean by such a word, you're also saying that I invoke someone who knows more than me.

### **Uwe Pörksen**

Yes, who is above me, who is—

### **David Cayley**

So I place myself in a hierarchy.

### **Uwe Pörksen**

Yes. That is how those words work. There is a famous lecture of Max Weber's, one of the speeches he gave in 1919, after the First World War, before his students in Heidelberg. He said, our modern situation is this: None of us can explain how a streetcar works. But we live in the belief that we can get the knowledge from somebody, from some experts. It is the same thing with those words. They are like streetcars rolling through our language, and there are people, there are spheres where you can ask, what is the meaning of those words?

### **David Cayley**

When someone speaks such a word, what happens to them? What does the word do for them as they use it?

### **Uwe Pörksen**

They define themselves as a client, as a client of sexuality experts, as a client of modernization experts; that's one thing. I think what is more important perhaps is that the use of those words gives them an alien form of self-perception.

They learn by words like *communication*: I am a man, a human being, who communicates, who has to be informed, who has to be developed, who has to be modernized, who is a system of circling energy. Sexuality is a special form of energy circling in my system. This is the form of alien self-perception, which I learn when I agree to use these words, in their popular sense.

### **David Cayley**

Does it also confer some benefit on the user, so that he feels he's now speaking in a serious way?

### **Uwe Pörksen**

Yes, I think so. I think it gives some prestige to use words like *communication* and *information*. It's a word which is accepted everywhere. It sounds scientific. You show that you belong to the empire, that you belong to the Roman church, if you use those words.

### **David Cayley**

What effect do plastic words have on other words?

### **Uwe Pörksen**

In Germany we say: "*Sie sehen alt aus,*" "They look old." Teenagers talking together will say, "*Er sah plötzlich alt aus*"—suddenly he looked old. He looked backward. And that is what happens, I think. Those words are a little bit electric. There is a suggestion of modernity, of success, or of a positive way of thinking. You give the impression that you live at the cutting edge.

### **David Cayley**

Another of your criteria for defining plastic words is that they eliminate or displace their synonyms. So precise ways of speaking fall into disuse. Is that right?

### **Uwe Pörksen**

Yes. You can observe that for things which are now pointed to by words like *sexuality*, or like *communication*, there are a lot of words which you could also use. In Germany, I think I could tell you many words which are possible instead of *communication*: *geschwätz*, *rede*, *gespräch*, *unterhaltung*, *klausch*—so many words. When the word *communication* is *en vogue*, the other words seem to disappear.

It's the same thing which seems to go on in agriculture. There is now only one sort of rice, or corn, or tomato, used in a region where twenty or thirty years ago there were a lot of different types used. That also seems to go on with language in some degree.

### **David Cayley**

So one could speak of a reduction in linguistic diversity as much as one now speaks of a reduction in biological diversity?

### **Uwe Pörksen**

Yes. There's a reduction. This international code of thirty or forty key words—maids which serve at any time—displaces a lot of very fine, *verbum proprium* or *mot juste* expressions. These expressions seem to disappear.

### **David Cayley**

In the final chapter of his book, Uwe Pörksen uses the term *mathematization* to describe the colonization of everyday talk by the nouveau-riche nephews of science which he calls "plastic words." He uses the term not because plastic words are mathematically precise—quite the opposite—but because they share the abstract, flexible, ahistorical character of numbers and, like numbers, look past the peculiarities of things to their regular, repeatable, and universal attributes.

In his chapter on mathematization, Pörksen cites two striking parallels to this idea. The first is the history of twentieth-century linguistics, from Ferdinand de Saussure to Noam Chomsky, which has increasingly seen words as arbitrary elements of a code. The second is "newspeak," the parody language invented by George Orwell in his novel *1984*. The idea of newspeak, Pörksen says, arose from Orwell's encounter with something called "Basic English." This was an attempt to create an international *lingua franca* by simplifying English. It was first described by its inventor, C.K. Ogden, in a book published in 1930.

### **Uwe Pörksen**

Ogden brought out this "Basic English," I think eight hundred and fifty words, a small lexicon, just words which were usable in many contexts, and Orwell was very fond of this project. He was very much interested in it and he was very fond of it. And he also tried to use this Basic English. He was working as a journalist during the Second World War, writing reports and observing what was going on in the war between the United Kingdom and Germany. In the course of these writings he noticed the dangerous, even satanic, way in which such a reduced language works. During that time he worked out his nightmare utopia, *1984*, and he wrote down the rules for what he called "newspeak."

When I tried to work out my plastic words, to describe them, I didn't think of *1984*. It was long before that I had read this book, and at that moment I didn't think of it. I don't know how I was reminded. I think somebody said,

look at that book and read how he describes the language of *1984*, and there were so many parallels that I was surprised.

And the main thing for me is that it's a reduced language. It's a flexible language: the parts can be combined in many ways; they are like flexible building blocks, like Lego. They are ahistoric. History has disappeared. They don't evoke local and historical moments.

### **David Cayley**

One of your interesting remarks about plastic words is not just that they displace synonyms but that they might also displace a silence.

### **Uwe Pörksen**

Yes, they're like a light which seems to reach every place. They are shadowless. I don't know why, but it seems to me that they are shadowless. The word *modernization* seems to mean that there has to be no place where modernization does not take place, *communication* where communication does not take place, *sexuality* where it does not take place. The words are like an imperative, like an order. Yes, they have such an expanding light.

### **David Cayley**

I'm also interested in your image of building blocks. You seem to be saying that these are words that have more of a function than a content. So you can take a group of such words and put them like dice into a cup and roll them out and you'll get an intelligible sentence, or seemingly intelligible sentence, much of the time. So, "Education is a process of communication," isn't it?

### **Uwe Pörksen**

Yes, you're right. [laughing]

### **David Cayley**

But communication is also a process of education.

### **Uwe Pörksen**

[laughing] That's just what I was going to say. And another thing which is interesting in this context: you can take five of these words and combine them with the expert vocabulary of any sphere, perhaps of agriculture or health. You take words like *education* and *development* and *process* and combine them with words of the sphere of medicine, health or agriculture, and then you have a model of a new reality.

This way you can change a city into a laboratory; you can change an institute into a laboratory. Tell them that a process has to go on, a communication process, a modernization process, an information process. The president of the German state in which I live, Baden Württemberg, Lothar Späth, wrote a book in which he said that we are an "information society." That was one year before the propaganda for creating this information society started. We were reformulated as an information society and I think the words were the foreriders or the avant-garde, the leaders in this "process." Is it clear?

### **David Cayley**

Yes. In fact, you say in the book that the words are channels that run ahead of history.

### **Uwe Pörksen**

Yes.

### **David Cayley**

So you see the words as actually creating a mental space in which certain things become possible?

### **Uwe Pörksen**

Yes. It seems to me that these words are powerful. They make an area plain for change, for new structures, for new systems, for a change of structures (that's one of those words).

### **David Cayley**

When you say "they make it plain," you mean they flatten it out?

### **Uwe Pörksen**

Yes, they make it flat. They make it nearly a *tabula rasa*, where you can build up new Lego cities, Lego institutions, Lego education. They make history disappear. That is why, when I read the texts of city planning in Freiburg, the city where I live, or of agriculture and wine planning in the surrounding region, or the plans of the minister-president of our state to make an informed society, and I saw how similarly these texts were constructed, on the one hand it seemed to me ridiculous—I wanted to write a satire—and on the other hand I thought it was frightening.

### **David Cayley**

One of the things which Pörksen finds frightening about plastic words is the way in which they overshadow and

denature ordinary experience. When *desire* is swallowed by *sexuality*, or *conversation* becomes *communication*, private life itself tends to disappear. All acts become public and exemplary instances of some wider principle; the domain of colloquial or vernacular speech loses its sovereignty. Plastic words, according to Pörksen, blur and often obliterate the boundaries between everyday life and the sphere of scientifically based planning, administration, and expert knowledge. They are in this sense metaphors. A metaphor like "the harbour of marriage," a traditional German phrase, fuses two distinct and separate realities in one image. The plastic words also link two domains, but with a crucial difference. Metaphors freely reveal their nature—no one imagines that marriage is literally a harbour—plastic words do not.

### **Uwe Pörksen**

You combine two spheres which could be—perhaps should be—autonomous, in one expression. There is the sphere of science from which these words derive, and the sphere of everyday life in which they are used, and there is a gap between those two spheres, I think. Or at least there could be, and should be. The interesting thing about those words, it seems to me, is that you don't notice this gap. You lose the awareness that there is a gap.

You can use *sexuality* here and there, *development* here and there, *communication* here and there, *information* here and there. Those words are bridges between those two spheres, combining them, giving the impression that there is no difference between the sphere of science on the one hand and the sphere of everyday life on the other. Scientific terms are used as social tools and this means that the social sphere, the sphere of our everyday life, our city life, our education, is looked on in the same way as a scientist looks on his phenomena, on his objects.

The expert uses these words to work on the world in the same way he would work in his lab. And thus, those words are able to change our social life, also our family life, into a lab.

### **David Cayley**

How would you define a vernacular? What do you mean by the term *vernacular*?

### **Uwe Pörksen**

In my book and in this conversation, I have used the word in a wide sense, but I think one could also describe *vernacular* as a language within horizons, locally bound; you hear an individual voice, you use gestures; you have a tone in your voice, you are concrete; you don't use power; you don't say "*Roma locuta est*"—"Rome has spoken." You are just colloquial.

Plastic words, on the other side, are words which are not combined with gestures, which don't have any tone, any personal touch; they are hygienic, sterile, universal. A word which is used as a term of physics, like *information*, or *energy*, must be a word which has a universal meaning. That is by definition. If it is used as a social tool, if it is used in the context of society, it creates uniformity. Universality creates a change in society towards uniformity.

### **David Cayley**

You have identified thirty or forty plastic words. It seems that any era must have special words, words that are bigger than other words, words that Lewis Carroll calls "portmanteau words"—suitcases into which many things can be stuffed. If we looked in the Middle Ages, these words might be theological terms. Perhaps if we tried to define *substance*, it would take us twelve or twenty pages to do it. How are the plastic words, in your view, different from such words?

### **Uwe Pörksen**

The Roman Empire, I think, already had some words which were spread by the coins they had: "*Pax Romana*," for example. In each province were spread coins which had an inscription like that. "*Pax Romana*" was one of the important ones: it was a compact saying which told people that they were living in a great empire, which meant *pax*, *justitia*, *sanitas*, and so on. And in the period from which you cited "*substantia*," there were philosophical and theological terms which were perhaps thought of as interpretations of the world which had much authority. But I think these words were interpretations with authority, but not, by definition, tools of permanent change. The plastic words are tools of permanent change without limit. They are totally limitless; they don't have horizons; they don't have borders. They are an imperative to go on.

That is, I think, what the word *sexuality* does. It says, a society has to be a sexualized society; it's like a task for everyone, to come along with sexuality, to practice it, and

so on. You know, it's the same with *development*; it's the same with *communication*, with *information*. Why? But it is what these words say. Therefore, I think there is a big difference between this modern code and older terms and abstractions which were also powerful.

If we speak about "substance," it is a word which, in many texts, will be clear, defined and precise. It's an abstract, useful in some, perhaps in many contexts. The same can happen if you want to use these plastic words. A word like *communication* is useful if you are writing a text as a scientist, or as a scholar. If you are doing some research on bees, you will have to talk about how they *communicate*. You need an abstract word. And you can use this word *communication* or *communicate* in a precise manner. Therefore, I would like to say that it is not the words themselves which should be put on an index. When I describe these plastic words, I mean one side of the die. It is the side which today is mostly face up, but it's only one side, and there are contexts in which these are good words.

### **David Cayley**

What do you mean in saying that plastic words transform history into nature or naturalize history?

### **Uwe Pörksen**

They are like spectacles which look on reality in one way; they look on it as a natural phenomenon; they look on it like a physician. I don't say anything about the way a physician looks, but the problem is that we, by these words, learn to look on society like the physician and in that way we change society itself.

### **David Cayley**

Your book sometimes seems to have an apocalyptic note and, obviously, to the extent that plastic words naturalize history, they represent the end of history and, in an even more frightening sense, the end of experience. But when I speak to you, I see that you also have a healthy respect for the power and possibilities of resistance.

### **Uwe Pörksen**

Yes. If I think of the city I live in, the country I live in, my family, my brothers and so on, there are so many things which are so encouraging. The young people, the young students I work with. There was a time when I had plunged into these texts, and was reading day by day the texts of the planners, the texts of the advertisers, the texts of politicians, texts about how to change the wonderful wine-growing area

around our city—to change within ten years mountains that haven't changed since the Roman empire. Then one cannot sleep. One sweats. It seems as if reality itself disappears, that reality is no longer reality. But that is only one side. And sometimes I think it would be a very good exercise to focus on the other side, not to stay in the shadows, but to look on the other side.

### **David Cayley**

Well, I think a book like yours implicitly does look on the other side by its existence.

### **Uwe Pörksen**

[laughing] I hope so, yes, I hope so. Our whole everyday life is full of situations where you can use a concrete, precise, and in this way also a poetic word or phrase. So the possibility of escaping the power of these words is there at any time, I think, but it is not so easy.

### **Lister Sinclair**

On *Ideas*, you've been listening to a conversation between David Cayley and Professor Uwe Pörksen of the Albert Ludwigs University in Freiburg, Germany. Professor Pörksen is a linguist, a specialist in medieval literature, and a novelist. His book, *Plastic Words: The Language of an International Dictatorship*, was published in Germany in 1988. The book is not yet available in English. The program was prepared and presented by David Cayley. Production assistants were Gail Brownell and Liz Nagy. Technical production by Greg Fleet. Two books by David Cayley, *Ivan Illich in Conservation* and *Northrop Fry in Conversation*, are now available in book stores; the publisher is House of Anansi Press. The executive producer of *Ideas* is Bernie Lucht.

Transcription by Hedy Muysson.