

Bad language in all its forms

Minister for Conservation Eugenie Sage says the death of two trampers during recent South Island floods was a “worst-case scenario”.

Death always is, I would think.

I don't mean to make light of a tragedy, but you have to wonder who advises the minister on her choice of words. It'll be her communications people, I suppose.

I suspect this because the PR school was next to the journalism one when I taught at Auckland Institute of Technology, and although we avoided one another I was aware of the sort of language their students were encouraged to develop.

After all, they had cases to develop, whereas the journos were being taught to scrutinise such things.

While the school of paid gossips taught students to call a spade a bloody spade, those at the school of paid liars looked for the super-charge proffered by adverbs, multi-syllabic expressions and a lofty tone.

The minister's statement set me wondering if there is a scale of scenarios and tragedies these days that can be applied by officials to impress on the press that something is other than it seems.

Is there something called a “least-case scenario” and do tragedies come in degrees of tragicness?

I'm thinking a least-case scenario would be me cutting my finger slightly yesterday and having to stick a plaster on it.

So, what do we call a car accident that injures seven people, although none of them fatally? A mid-case scenario?

The word "tragedy" is problematic. How many deaths do you need for its use to be justified? Is a single demise as tragic as many?

My old mate, broadcasting journalist supreme Pam Corkery, used to come in and shock my students with graphic accounts of her reporting days, and reckoned one broadcasting outlet she worked for had rules around tragedies: there needed to be five deaths for an event to justify use of the word.

She also had a tale about covering the burning death of twin infants. When she got back to the office she reported to the news boss that it was unusual enough to be called a tragedy because the victims were twins. "Identical?" he asked. "They are now."

Such is the way most journalists, me included, insulate themselves from the horror encountered in the job. I (and Pam, probably) look back on such things and recoil at such insensitivity, but it was needed at the time, privately, to survive.

It's for a similar reason government officials adapt their language the other way, in the direction of sweetness and light (and unreality). It's to delude themselves, but more so the public, that the truth may be too dreadful to confront, too extreme for those quick to judge, and perhaps change their vote.

But it's not just journalists, PR operatives, politicians, managers, sports stars and bureaucrats who have trouble with the extremities of language.

There was a fine example on TV news last weekend when an Aussie motorist stopped to help a couple of women whose SUV was about to be swallowed by a flood.

Someone in his vehicle, his daughter I think, started filming on her phone and providing a classic commentary, not just for its urgency but because of her exclamations, especially one.

These days, the English-speaking world's most popular expression of surprise seems to be "oh my god", or OMG on social media. So, what do you say when the occasion calls for something stronger, without employing swear words?

In this case the young woman used her full inner dictionary and cried: "Oh my actual god". Twice.

I'm not sure if I should capitalise "god" here, but think perhaps I should because she seemed to be referring to a divine being of greater significance than the lower-case OMGs most people shout about, perhaps her personal religious deity of a higher order.

Swear creep has now reached such levels that all Netflix films use C and F words without restraint.

I can't recall the last time a TVNZ presenter had a misspeak, but the day one does we can kiss goodbye to surviving expectations that our children shouldn't curse until at least their first day at school. After that, of course, the cause is lost.

If I was forced to choose between obfuscation and cussing, I'd go with the latter every time, for obvious reasons.

The truth is invoked with random carelessness in public life. Always has been, always will be. Language is the instrument used to muddy its waters.