

Obscurantism in Academic Writing: What It Is and Why It Is Bad

Jens Kjeldgaard-Christiansen 

Introduction

The American analytic philosopher John Searle once asked the French postmodernist Michel Foucault the following pointed question: “Why do you write so badly?” Searle respected Foucault as a thinker but thought that his writing was often unclear and occasionally obscure. Foucault responded to the question with candid self-awareness: “In France, you have to have 10 percent incomprehensible. Otherwise, people won’t think it’s deep; they won’t think you’re a profound thinker.” In other words, the textual obscurity was a deliberate and purposeful choice. Searle was astonished by that answer. He conveyed his astonishment to another difficult Frenchman and friend of his, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Could it really be true that Parisian academics were injecting some significant amount of jargon, vagueness, ambiguity, and misdirection into their prose for the sake of bamboozling their readers? Bourdieu’s answer could hardly be misunderstood: “It’s worse than 10 percent—more like 20 percent.”¹

To say that a piece of writing is obscure is not necessarily to accuse its author of *obscurantism*, defined by Viktor Ivanković (2016, 531) as “the deliberate exercise of making one’s text opaque for the purposes of deceiving the readership in various ways.” The obscurantist “abuses the reader’s natural sense of curiosity and interpretive charity” by “setting up a game of verbal smoke and mirrors to suggest depth and insight where none exists” (Buekens and Boudry 2014, 126). This is the charge to which, if Searle’s story is true, Foucault ought to plead guilty.² In addition to such willful artifice, obscure writing may also be the result of carelessness and perhaps even an unconscious unwillingness to expose one’s ideas to criticism and possible refutation—after all, only arguments that are clearly stated can be clearly refuted. I will get back to this point.

¹ Searle recounts this story in different places. My reference here is an audio recording from a lecture of his (2012).

² Incidentally, the story illustrates that obscurantism is not an all-or-nothing deal. According to Searle, real insight shone through and frequently dissipated Foucault’s conceptual smokescreen. I tend to agree with that assessment.