

OVERTURE

If we are each lead actors dwelling in our own eccentric worlds—making beds, rowing dinghies, devouring days, craving sweets and secrets, preparing soil for a line of seeds—then in these inscrutable scenes, somewhere, sometime, who does not play the role of a salesperson? Who has not coaxed a child to bed with the lure of a yarn? Who would not yell *Jump!* from a lifeboat to a loved one stranded on the deck of a fast-sinking ship? Traded trinkets for treasure. Treasure for trash. Bartered for stakes.

Merriam Webster Dictionary defines ‘selling’ as:

1. *giving or handing over (something) in exchange for money*
2. *persuading someone of the merits of*
3. *tricking or deceiving (someone)*

Money. Trickery. Deceit. To sell someone a bill of goods is to make them believe a lie. To sell someone out is to commit an act of betrayal. No wonder selling is morally suspect and salespeople are reflexively scorned.

Brian Tracy, a sales specialist, defines selling as *the process of persuading a person that your product or service is of more value to him or her than the price you are asking.*

I define selling as *a perversion of conversation: casting a spell, creating a little world within which logic and feeling attach to an object of desire.*

As Paul Valéry wrote about crime: “Every [sale] has something of the dream about it. [Sales] engender all they need: victims, circumstances, pretexts, opportunities”.

A face-to-face sale is a scrap of human drama, rooted in a marketplace scaled to gestures and voices. I say my lines; you say yours. We may haggle a bit.

As actors in live theater, we improvise our scripts, investing our tales with heart as we tell them. The role of my character, costumed in a smile, is to slip you product. That is the show. If I succeed, it is comedy; if I fail, tragedy. The play is as dramatic as people are canny, innocent, and wild, and is as deep as the stake of desire driven into our hearts.

To make a sale is to complete something that has sequence and presence, something that doesn't curdle. A sale unfolds with forward motion and tension, with the compressed *frisson* of a quest or detective tale.

A sale proceeds from a measure of agreement. It cannot be commanded but must be coaxed. To make a sale is to disassemble a time bomb of *No!*

The language of a sale never erodes its form. As Paul Grice wrote about politeness, the nature of its communication is a special kind of intention designed to be recognized by the recipient. We mime simple sales— witness a pantomime in a foreign bazaar—but salesmanship is mainly an oral, dialogic art, and the more complex the sale, the more words matter.

Sales are vanishing acts. As perishing things, they dissolve as they are consummated, gone as soon as they have been closed. For the career salesperson, every sale creates a void, a Sisyphean need for eternal recurrence, as with breath.

A sale is an event; an *agōn*; an ambush; a puzzle; a treasure hunt; a consummation; a pressure of circumstances; a unit of exhaustion; a communicative relationship; a system for distributing goods; a musical score, fully orchestrated, sung to laws beyond harmony and dissonance.

A sale swings on a hinge where things can come together or apart.

Rhythm, form, and content are the time, space, and matter of a sale.

Selling is not a theoretical discipline, but one which deals with the particulars.

A sale has three stages: opening, making, and closing. A simple sale compacts these into a single brief encounter, while a complex sale elongates them.

A virtuoso salesperson plays the phases like a deft accordionist.

I have a sensitive sales detector that *ticks...ticks...ticks...* when I hear sounds of selling—the whiff of a wheedle, the hum of a hustle. While the boundaries of a sale are fluid, even a small child or a dog can feel it, which is why parents put on pretend voices to disguise their intentions. Our sale detectors malfunction not only when we are paranoid, a deficiency of trust triggering them inappropriately, but also when we are naive or half asleep, oblivious to a trawling sales pitch netting us.

But there are also ambiguous cases, where “it depends” is an accurate response to the question of whether something is a sale, where context is determinative. And there are cases we would hesitate to call sales that nonetheless contain some sales elements, although one or more others of them are missing, compromised, or violated.

Here is where the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein’s concept of family resemblances comes into play. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, he posits that things may be connected by a series of overlapping similarities, where no single feature is common to all the things.

Might it astonish you to consider how many common actions touch the act of selling? If I were to heap up a pile of verbs having family resemblances to selling, I would include bribing, threatening,

extorting, forcing, bossing, parenting a young child, advertising, begging, snake-charming, hypnotizing, arguing, gifting, teaching, fishing, hunting, , stealing, choosing, seducing, suggesting, advising, helping, sharing, consulting, brokering, compromising, debating, legislating, ministering, summing up before a jury. A plea bargain. A hostage negotiation. Gentling a wild horse.

Within these relationships, little acts of selling may occur, but we identify them as ‘not-sales’ because of the lack of ground for which the selling element is figure.

A sale wrapped in a threat: *My father made him an offer he couldn't refuse... either his brains or his signature would be on the contract.*

To call someone to dinner is a petite sale when the other person is otherwise engaged and reluctant to stop. *I'm not hungry* may be a refusal to buy.

If your argument changed my mind, have you made a sale? Does my writing itself consist of an act of selling? These questions weary me...

Everybody sells, but nobody likes being sold. A sale occurs *between* people, and almost always involves an ambiguity of exchange. The acts of buying and selling mingle. Is it one act or two? Did I buy or was I sold? Did I act freely or was I acted upon? Am I the subject or the object, agent or recipient, perpetrator or mark, chooser or persuaded, or an indeterminate mix? Where does my will begin, untainted by the salesman's breath?

“Up and down! Up and down! I will lead them up and down...”. Shakespeare's Puck has not exactly made a sale.

Can you imagine a teacher working on commission for each bit of knowledge she sold you...

Preaching is selling—and the currency is my soul...

Can buyer and seller be the same person? Weighing costs and benefits in an internal scale, bringing different selves to the fore, more than once I discover I have sold myself short, the price too dear for the gain.

Are sales only a human thing? Often when I slip my dog a tidbit from my plate at the dinner table, unable to resist her entreaties, I feel she has made a sale, even a sucker of me.

As I ask these questions—which are rarely rhetorical—I also keep asking myself: *Am I plowing a field, turning over earth to some purpose?*

Pop-up sales pepper conversations. We all sell and buy more than we realize. Circulating desire, commerce, is at the core of being alive.