

Jingle Jangle Jargon

Don't let business-speak weaken your communication effectiveness

When a school buddy tells Homer Simpson that smoking will make them late for class, the future Springfield Sage retorts: "Pff! English? Who needs that? I'm never going to England!"

After we've finally stopped laughing at Homer, we might usefully reflect on arguably Britain's greatest export, English. The BBC says it's '*spoken by 450 million people globally, with one billion more using it as a second language*'. Understanding its nuances varies, so we must handle it with care to avoid its misuse becoming the source of light-hearted Xmas articles and rebukes.



Source: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Homer-Simpson-Christmas-Sound-Card/dp/B001M13TO0>

If you've ever sat through an excess of unhelpful business-speak, tuning out to play buzzword bingo to kill boredom, you are not alone.

Some translations

Here are some terms that are derided by many outside the business world^{3,4} – and even by some within it; you may recognise a few. The squeamish should look away now!

We start with the space race. *It's not rocket science*: patronisingly implies "it's really very easy". It came into business use first during the Cold War,

triggered by the shock launch of the Russian Sputnik satellite in 1957.

Pushing the needle: means "taking to the extreme, or next level", visually referencing a rev. counter or speedometer. Related to *pushing the envelope*, which first emerged in Tom Wolfe's 1979 bestseller about test pilots and the US space programme, *The Right Stuff*.

Shoot the puppy (an extreme version of *bite the bullet* or *grasp the nettle*). When you need to take decisions or actions that will be truly shocking. Thought to derive from a satirical advert for a fictitious US gameshow, where audience members are offered prizemoney to shoot a pet being held by a small child.

You might get away with an occasional animal reference, like an *elephant in the room*, meaning a major topic that nobody wants to talk about. Or how about "*You screwed the pooch all day?*". Now it apparently denotes the avoidance of productivity, as used by Charlton Heston in the 1994 film *True Lies*, but it had an earlier derivation (from *The Right Stuff*) and rather different meaning - that a pilot had died in the wreckage of their plane.

Author Steven Poole believes the use of the term *annual leave* (rather than 'holiday') is a clue: '*we have entered a hellishly self-parodic downward spiral*'. Perhaps that's extreme, but using plain English carries fewer risks.

The holiday sector received scrutiny and mockery just recently for having its very own jarring jargon: a '*bization*', '*gramping*', or '*jobby-moon*', anyone?⁵

If it's so risky, why is business jargon used so much, or at all? Some people believe it wins them kudos and makes their messages 'stickier', even though memorability more often relies on originality, rather than derivativeness. Some think these phrases make them sound knowledgeable, or on the inside



Des Harney

Advice *squeezed* straight from the experts



Jingle Jangle Jargon... (Cont'd)

track. While others think they just give the hard-of-thinking something to say, when nothing sensible occurs to them.

At GPB, we generally advise against using jargon, with good reason. Word choices should build connections with an audience, not break them. If you're memorable for all the *wrong* reasons, you risk reducing your persuasiveness. Jargon can be confusing and/or distracting; potentially reducing the clarity of your communication, obscuring your key messages and eroding rapport. You cannot assume others will easily grasp the same meaning and message you intend from your affected word use.

Inappropriate phrases may even convey unintended negative messages about you, personally. A potential downside is bafflement of the uninitiated, keeping them outside of your persuasive influence. Whether intentionally or not. So if you routinely communicate by sprinkling around terms like those shared above, then it may be high time for reflection and greater caution.

The Foreign Office explains that English has many antecedents: *"its flexibility to absorb new words [means] we speak a melange of mongrel origin... the Angles and Saxons... the Normans... English adopted words from Spanish, (e.g. guerrilla); from India (pyjamas); ... from Arabic (coffee, cotton, sugar and algebra). It is this absorption capacity that makes English so rich and fascinating, capable of great poetry and elegance, open to puns, nuance."*⁶ It just doesn't need any potentially distracting jargon added.

Those railing against business-speak have a valid point. By definition, clichés are recycled, tired expressions. Jargon is a kind of slang, a language sub-set used to demonstrate membership of a gang, club or sect. It rarely helps to positively differentiate your message, but does run the risk of sounding derivative, boorish or exclusive. It's also very easily and painfully lampooned.

Think of examples from TV shows like *The Office*, or in workplace cartoons like *Alex and Dilbert*. Using jargon

opens us up to the risk of appearing like comic characters; of sounding like David Brent clones, and we wouldn't want THAT, now, would we? Really?



Toe-curling: Slough's premier Jargonaut
Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Brent

Such easy ridicule should instinctively put us on our guard. The use of jargon is not necessarily always wrong. But we should make absolutely certain that it adds value, rather than eroding it, whenever used. GPB's Jargon Kit should help you make a sound evaluation⁷.

Let me end by running this seasonal wish up the flagpole: that leveraging the yuletide consumables on your impending festive journey, by knife-and-forking them without boiling the ocean, will be a no-brainer resulting in a paradigm shift. Don't turn into an 800-pound gorilla, though. Get your ducks in a row and revert to me offline for some face time on this, circling back to touch base and take a deeper dive.

Or maybe don't do ANY of that. D'oh!

By Des Harney

1. 'The Simpsons', Season 2 Episode 12: "The Way We Was" - Homer to Barney Gumble
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000b8ny>
3. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/analysis-and-features/push-the-needle-you-desk-jockey-a-guide-to-office-speak-760164.html>
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2013/oct/22/a-z-modern-office-jargon>
5. Metro, 9th Dec, 2019 — 'Escape' (pg 33)
6. <https://blogs.fco.gov.uk/petermillett/2016/10/28/the-power-of-english/>
7. The GPB Jargon Kit: <https://www.gpb.eu/2019/12/gpb-jargon-kit-with-acknowledgement-to-honeywell.html>

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