

## Speaking of Jargon

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# Speaking of Jargon

If we hate it so much, why do we all use it?

by Gwen Moran

**T**he term *jargon* has become a catchall for a variety of words and phrases, including industry terminology, an alphabet soup of acronyms, and language so contorted that it leaves the listener blinking in confusion. It's become a popular scapegoat for business communication run aground and has been accused of erasing creative expression in office settings in favor of mind-dulling, hackneyed terms whose meaning may not even be clear. But although writing and communications experts routinely warn against its use and champion plain English, a blanket condemnation of jargon can be as off the mark as excessive reliance on it. Used correctly, jargon can actually be a way to talk succinctly about complex topics, such as manufacturing plastic molds or building a house, to a circle of people in the same field.

"Jargon is neither a good nor a bad thing," says Suzanne Bates, author of *Speak Like a CEO: Secrets for Commanding Attention and Getting Results*. "The biggest mistake executives and professionals make is to fail to ask themselves if what they're saying is the best way to communicate to the audience that they're targeting."

Understanding the various forms of jargon is the first step in knowing when it is acceptable. Todd Dewett, associate professor of management at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, has identified three categories of jargon:

**Functional, or industry, jargon.** These are words and phrases known throughout a given profession or industry but not commonly known to others. When people in information technology refer to a "performant" (someone who shows exceptional performance or does something in a cost-effective way), they're using functional jargon with the goal of saving time and improving efficiency. In some cases, this lingo may make its way into the popular lexicon. For example, a doctor's request to get something "stat," or quickly, has become well known thanks to the profusion of television hospital dramas.

**Organizational jargon.** Individual companies develop their own methods of communication, too. This form of jargon can be shorthand for commonly known concepts and ideas within the company or group. When someone at Apple says an idea "doesn't suck," for instance, it's considered a positive response, says Dewett. This insider lingo can foster a sense of community and help to get organizational concepts across more clearly.

**Mass jargon.** Mass jargon includes buzzwords and sayings that can have ambiguous meanings. This is where sports analogies creep into the office alongside words and terms like "synergy," "leverage," and "blue sky." Although mass jargon can become part of organi-

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zational jargon when adopted as part of a company's culture, it is more often language with murky meaning, adding no real efficiency to communication. This is the type of jargon that can make language more cumbersome and less meaningful if used to dissemble or to simply sound important or intelligent rather than to add linguistic value.

**Obscuring the Message**

Jon Warshawsky, coauthor of *Why Businesspeople Speak Like Idiots: A Bullfighter's Guide*, agrees that jargon has its place, but it is a limited one, and he warns that too many people use language that is needlessly complicated and overblown. They may be trying to sound smarter or to mimic their bosses. This type of language doesn't facilitate communication; it hinders it.

In fact, people may even intentionally hinder communication, using long-winded responses, acronyms, and evasiveness to avoid answering hard questions or to hide meaning or failure. This tactic was played to perfection by former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan, who admitted in his recent memoir, *The Age of Turbulence: Adventures in a New World*, that he purposely used confusing language to avoid answering questions when testifying before Congress. It may have worked for the august economist, but for the rest of us, this type of language abuse is more likely to cause confusion and create misunderstandings, damaging any transactions or relationships in which it plays a role.

But not everyone has an ulterior motive when using jargon, says Anatoly Liberman, professor at the University of Minnesota and author of *Word Origins...and How We Know Them: Etymology for Everyone*. He believes that people who wield big words

and clichés often think that this extravagant language gives the indication that their thoughts are equally large. There's also an inclination to sanitize language by making it overblown and devoid of any humor or passion. Ostensibly intended to achieve neutrality, such an approach is more likely to eliminate any engagement with the reader or audience.

**Eschew Obfuscation**

The key to using jargon effectively is to prevent it from crossing the line from useful shorthand to obfuscation. Using functional or organizational jargon can be an easy way to communicate ideas clearly for people who are fluent in those terms and acronyms, but it may lead to confusion for a more general audience. For example, some of the most common terms in business, such as *strategy*, *synergy*, and *onboarding*, have more than one interpretation. Even in the same industry, these terms can mean something different from company to company. Therefore, it's critical to clarify what is meant: Is "strategy" just the idea or approach to the issue or does it encompass actions as well? Is the employee-onboarding process just the interview, or is it the company's entire recruiting process? Once the meaning and context of the term is communicated, it will carry specific nuances unique to the organization that more commonly used words might not share.

Even mass jargon isn't all bad, provided the speaker and audience understand specifically what terms mean. They can become part of a common lexicon within a company or among team members, says Bates. For example, a "blue-sky meeting" may have a different tone or purpose than a typical brainstorming or problem-solving meeting. A "value-add" may have an unspoken

set of parameters related to what is possible or desirable based on the company's resources or abilities.

### Getting the Jargon Right

It's critical, when using any type of jargon, to know when people are getting it and when they're just nodding their heads, desperately afraid that someone will find out they have no clue what is being said. Dewett recalls a recent classroom experience when one of his more advanced MBA students began talking about "SMEs," or subject matter experts; the rest of the students said nothing, but began to look quizzical. Dewett noticed and clarified the acronym to the class, which led to audible sighs of relief. The students didn't want to look unintelligent in front of their peers or professor. Once they understood the acronym, it became a quicker, crisper alternative for the more unwieldy full term.

Another way to gauge whether people are engaged and understanding what you're saying is by the type of questions you get. If they are nonexistent or off the mark, it could be a clue that your audience doesn't understand your words. However, if you're speaking to an audience with a sophisticated comprehension of the topic you're discussing, not using jargon may backfire, leaving your audience with the feeling that you, quite literally, don't speak their language.

Although much maligned, jargon does have a place in the well-spoken executive's vocabulary when it is used effectively to create a deeper level of understanding and trust. Particular words and phrases can become unique shorthand among colleagues within the same industry, company, or team. The key is to use the right words for the right audience in an environment that encourages others to press for clarity when the language is unclear. +

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## Resources

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Suzanne Bates, *Speak Like a CEO: Secrets for Commanding Attention and Getting Results* (McGraw-Hill, 2005): How to develop a communication style that is both effective and authentic. [www.amazon.com/dp/007145151X/](http://www.amazon.com/dp/007145151X/)

Brian Fugere, Chelsea Hardaway, and Jon Warshawsky, *Why Business People Speak Like Idiots: A Bullfighter's Guide* (Free Press, 2005): Targets clichés and meaningless jargon with aplomb, while making a case for a more plainspoken approach to business communication. [www.amazon.com/dp/0743269098/](http://www.amazon.com/dp/0743269098/)

Anatoly Liberman, *Word Origins...and How We Know Them: Etymology for Everyone* (Oxford University Press, 2005): An accessible, engaging look at how we determine the origins of our language. [www.amazon.com/dp/0195161475/](http://www.amazon.com/dp/0195161475/)

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