

Office Talk: Exploring Jargon in the Workplace

Beth Chandler

In this article, Chandler looks at the use of jargon in the workplace. Through research and personal experience, she defines jargon and explores how it's used in work environments. She then examines the trajectory of jargon as it travels through the activity system of the workplace and makes its way into different genres.

It's Monday morning, and our team is sitting around the conference table in my boss's office.

"Come on, guys, this is one of our core competencies," my boss is saying into the speakerphone. "I know this project has a lot of moving parts, but we really need to think outside the box and leverage our strengths. Beth, can you reach out to Steve? We really need his buy-in on this. I'm out of pocket the rest of the day, but let's circle back tomorrow morning so we can hit the ground running. Thanks, guys, we'll talk offline later," he says and hangs up the phone.

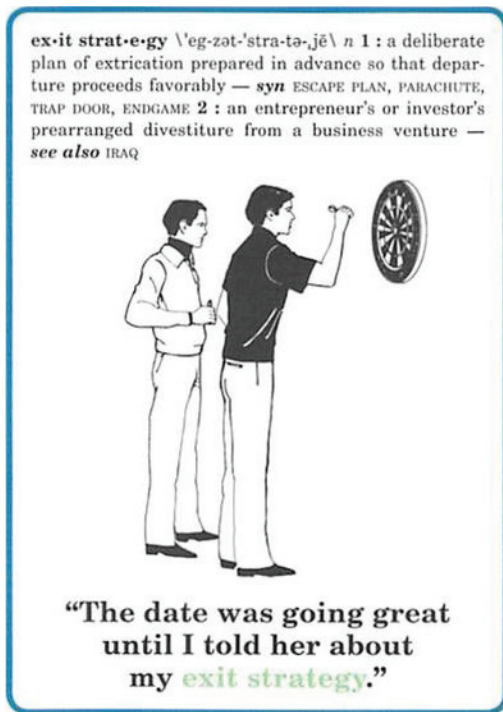
Aughh, jargon strikes in the workplace once again! So far this morning, I've counted 11 instances, and it's only 9:30. At times like this, I feel like a character in the movie *Office Space*. Come to think of it, my boss kind of looks like Bill Lumbergh. I'm going to need more coffee to drown out all this jargon.

Defining Jargon

Jargon is defined as specialized language used for a particular activity by a specific group of people (Merriam-Webster.com). If you've ever watched

Grey's Anatomy, you know that specialized language can come in handy in workplaces like Seattle Grace Hospital. Dr. Shepherd doesn't have time to stand around giving Meredith and her fellow interns lengthy instructions when there's an emergency. He needs specialized language he can use to communicate effectively and efficiently so they can save lives.

But when we think of jargon, we tend to think of it in negative terms. American Heritage Dictionary defines jargon as "the specialized language of a trade, profession, or similar group, especially when viewed as difficult to understand by outsiders," while Urban Dictionary describes it as "speech or writing having unusual or pretentious vocabulary, convoluted phrasing, and vague meaning." When I google "jargon," I find several articles on "the most annoying jargon" or "the jargon we wish would go away." Terms like "core competency," "buy-in," "going forward," and "drill down" top the lists of the most annoying examples of business jargon.



There is even a set of "Corporate Flashcards" promising to help "Speak suit in mere days!" Each card has a term like "multi-task" or "value proposition" on one side with a definition and funny illustration on the other side. The "Exit Strategy" card defines the term as "a deliberate plan of extrication prepared in advance so that departure proceeds favorably" and has a picture of two guys in bell-bottoms playing darts. One guy says to the other, "the date was going great until I told her about my exit strategy" (KnockKnockStuff.com). While I find these cards funny, they certainly don't portray jargon in a very positive manner.

Figure 1: Corporate Flashcards (KnockKnock.com)

Why People Hate Jargon

To get a better sense of the jargon people use, I started keeping a list on my phone (Figure 2). When I heard someone use a "jargony" word or phrase at work, at school, or in the news, I added it to my list. Friends and family helped by texting me words they heard too. Within a couple weeks, I had about 40 terms on my list, ranging from "bring to the table" to "on my radar" to "get on board." Through my research, I came across probably 200 more, including "open the kimono," "all hands on deck," and "circle the wagons." The use of jargon was prevalent in all sorts of settings.

If jargon is so common in our language, then what’s wrong with using it? The problem with using jargon in our speech or writing is that it can be ineffective because many of the terms are too vague to convey meaning. For example, what exactly does it mean to “reach out” to a co-worker? To call them? Email them? Talk to them in person? In my opening example, I’d chosen to call Steve because I felt I could explain the details of my project better over the phone than in an email, but afterward, I learned that my boss had wanted me to email Steve so we’d have a record of his “buy-in.”

For another project at work, I was asked to write a news release to announce a new committee and the work its members would be doing. When I interviewed the head of the committee, she excitedly explained to me they were “thinking outside the box” and “working toward a paradigm shift.” Either she didn’t yet know or understand the goals of the committee, or she wasn’t effective at communicating them. Either way, her words were too vague and didn’t provide any meaning about the committee I could use in a news release. “Jargon masks real meaning,” says Jennifer Chatman, a professor at the University of California-Berkeley’s Haas School of Business. “People use it as a substitute for thinking hard and clearly about their goals and the direction that they want to give others” (Mallet, Nelson, and Steiner).

While jargon is ineffective because it doesn’t contain meaning, specialized language, like what Dr. Shepherd might use, is effective because it has very specific meaning. Medical terminology has been defined for a specific purpose within a specific activity system like the Emergency Room. The medical professionals using this language have learned the terms and agreed to their meaning. They know the difference between an *ischemic* stroke and a *hemorrhagic* stroke, and they know how to treat a patient with one or the other. These terms are effective in this situation because they have specific meaning for the audiences who use them.

On the other hand, the jargon that’s often used in offices can be ineffective because it’s too vague to contain any meaning for the audiences who use it or for the audiences they may be communicating with. While specialized language used in the ER can lead medical professionals to take action, jargon doesn’t lead people to take action if the words don’t have any meaning, or that meaning isn’t clear to the people using and hearing the jargon.

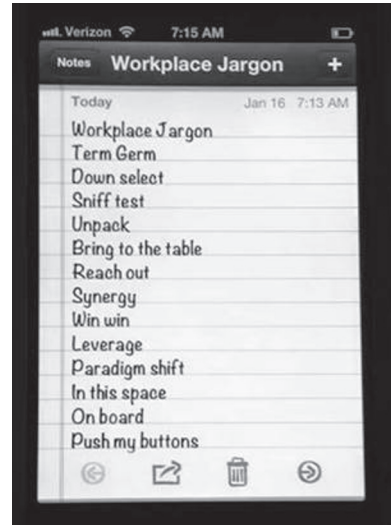


Figure 2: The Author’s List of Jargon

Audience is one of the most important factors to consider when writing in any genre. Understanding our audiences becomes even more important as our world, even right here in Central Illinois, becomes a more global society. Thanks to new technologies in travel and communication, our world has become much smaller, and traditional boundaries of nations, cultures, races, and ethnicities are being broken down (Stanford Friedman 261).

Today, we find ourselves communicating with people from all different cultures, languages, and backgrounds, whether it's in the workplace, in class, or online. When we communicate, we have to think about whether our audience understands the words and phrases we use and sometimes take for granted. For example, did my co-worker in Amsterdam, whose native language is Dutch, understand what our boss meant when he instructed us to get "buy-in?"

The Trajectory of Jargon

To track these kinds of ideas, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) provides a framework for helping us better understand the complexity of different genres, writing situations, languages, and cultures. Applying aspects of CHAT, such as how texts are produced, received, and distributed, can help us understand more about our text and the culture and activity of the field in which it was created (Walker).

I've always been amazed by the trajectory, or path, of jargon and how quickly it can spread through the workplace. I might hear my boss use a new term like "level-set" for the first time during our morning meeting (as in "we need to level-set everyone's expectations") and by my third cup of coffee, I've heard five more people use it. Where did "level-set" come from and why is everyone in the office suddenly using it?

The process of adding a new word to the English language used to be a fairly lengthy one, taking two to three years, according to the folks at Oxford Dictionary. Dictionary writers, or lexicographers, added the words they thought were most useful, even if no one was actually using those words.

Today, this process happens much faster, thanks to the Internet. Because of the Web, new words catch on faster with wider audiences in a shorter period of time, and people expect to see high-profile new words like "selfie" in the dictionary. Dictionary writers are continually tracking the use of new words in both print and online sources to determine whether the word is a candidate for being added to the English language. They select the ones that are the most important and significant and that are most likely to stand the test of time (OxfordDictionary.com). For example, new words that made Oxford's cut in 2013 include "phablet"

(larger than a smart phone but smaller than a tablet), “srsly” (short for seriously, srsly?) and “digital detox” (something we could probably all use).

Technology in the workplace has sped up jargon’s trajectory. In a short period of time, jargon can travel from one instance to multiple genres in various formats for audiences around the world. When thinking about the trajectory of jargon in the workplace, my experience is that it works something like this:

1. An employee comes up with a new term like “game changer” and uses it in a conference presentation to explain an important business concept.
2. Employees from companies all over the world attend the conference, either in-person or online. They note the presenter’s use of the new term “game changer” in describing the concept.
3. The employees go back to their companies and use the word “game changer” in meetings with their employees.
4. Those employees use “game changer” with their employees and so on.

These communications might happen face-to-face during a meeting in Chicago, in an email exchange with someone at the headquarters in New York, or on a conference call with employees in London. Employees throughout the company adopt these phrases in order to become a part of the workplace culture. Soon, employees are using “game changer” in all kinds of writing genres used throughout the company—the website, the CEO’s tweets, the president’s quote in a news release, a new product brochure and the annual report. The problem is that because the term is so vague in describing the concept, it doesn’t convey meaning to the company’s audiences.

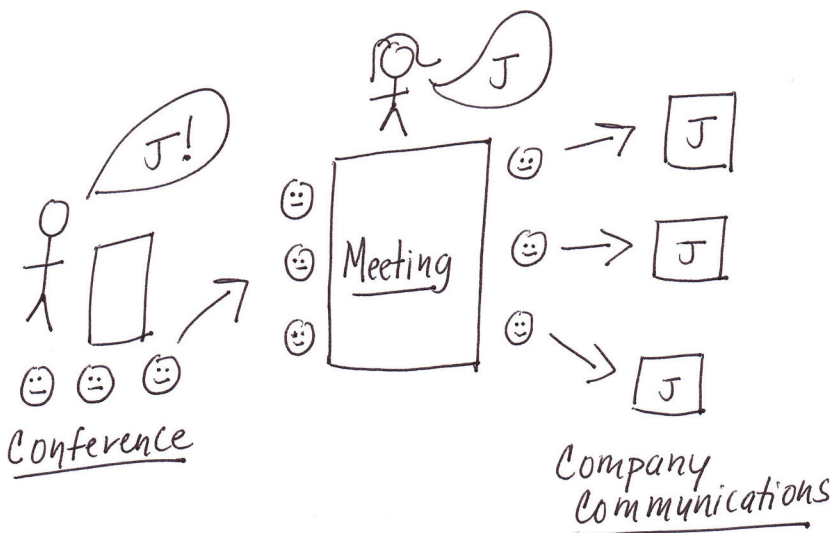


Figure 3: The Author Doodles on the Trajectory of Jargon in the Workplace

Key Takeaway

Most of us hear jargon used every day—at school, on the job, in the news. Because we’re exposed to jargon on a regular basis, we may find ourselves using it. The next thing we know, it sneaks its way into our writing. This happened to me recently, and I cringed when I found myself using the phrase “think outside the box” in a writing assignment.

So, what can we do to make sure jargon doesn’t get into our writing or that when it does, we are using it purposefully to create more meaning, not less? This is a complicated question, and there are no easy answers.

But going forward, I think we should work to sunset jargon and avoid this low-hanging fruit. When it comes to choosing words, we need to focus like a laser beam. Our next steps are to be proactive and drill down to choose value-added words that communicate clearly and meaningfully to our stakeholders. As we work toward this paradigm shift in our writing, it will become a best practice for all of us.

Do I have everyone’s buy-in? Be sure to keep me in the loop on this. I have an open-door policy.

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Beth Chandler is a Master's student in ISU's Professional Writing and Rhetoric program. Prior to beginning her Master's degree, she worked in public relations, where she fought and sometimes lost the battle to keep jargon out of her writing. She also likes to drink coffee.