Mangling language

The Craft of Writing · By Simon Townsend · 8 min read

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What the hell are you talking about?

The business of mangling language

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Find that you talk a lot but don't say much? You have probably mastered the art of business babble brought to you by the new managerial class who believe its ugly jargon is a badge of professionalism, rather than the death of ideas.

After more than a decade of babble, the language of the elites is losing its allure. Across town, businesses are starting to blush at the sound of business babble; in universities, academics are starting to question what the hell they're talking about and the management-speak industry is beginning to wonder whether it's time to switch to a simpler syntax.

Straight talk is on its way back and a quick visit to the local bookshop will help explain why. Don Watson's impassioned plea against gobbledegook was only the first of many explorations of the state of modern language. Apart from Watson's subsequent book, Weasel Words, there's now a shelf full of language laments in the bookshop. These include Word Watching, Lost For Words, In Other Words, Eats, Shoots & Leaves, Language Most Foul, Foolish Words and Accomodating Broccolli in the Cemetary: Or Why Can't Anyone Spell. (AFR readers: that title is meant to be misspelt.)

The literary world is leading the charge against the debasement of public language which has occurred largely because managerialism has crept into politics, academia, bureaucracy, the media and the workforce and brought with it a rhetoric that few understand.

The public's enthusiastic response is understandable. It has been the principal victim of dishonest words, whether as redundant workers, customers waiting on a customer-service line or voters trying to understand politicians' reasons for going to war.

But the language manglers themselves are also starting to clean up their communications and, as they do, many are discovering that once you strip management theories of cant, you're not left with much of a theory.

After reading Watson's book, Amanda Sinclair, a professor at the Melbourne Business School, vowed to clean up her language both in class and on the page. It hasn't been easy.

"The language that has grown up in management is wonderfully convenient," she says. "It adds a patter of credibility and deters any confronting questions. Once you try to strip it away, you see that the basis of management is pretty simple, so you have to wonder why you've been using that language in the past. Is it to make something seem more important than it is?"

To help her move beyond the cocoon of cliches, Sinclair says she doesn't allow herself to use jargon, she questions students who use jargon about what they mean and she tries not to read management books but to draw her inspiration from novels and other forms of writing.

But she wonders whether her efforts will be appreciated. "Everyone's more comfortable when you operate at that superficial level," she says, "and part of the reason why students are here is to learn that language. I suspect it will be a long time before we hear a radically different voice in the mainstream forums."

Perhaps not. Consulting firm Deloitte was trying to carve out a reputation as a straight-talking service at the same time that Watson's book was launched. In early 2003, the firm launched a software program, Bullfighter, which acts like a spellchecker in eliminating jargon, the passive tense and long sentences from documents.

Deloitte's chief marketing officer, David Redhill, who worked on the program, says that the exercise is worthwhile alone for its exposure of just how deeply slick-sounding jargon has penetrated the language. The program identified several thousand words that should be avoided.

Redhill says Bullfighter was a fun way to draw attention to the lazy use of language in the profession but it also exposes a fundamental flaw. "In a business where the currency is ideas rather than product," he says, "people feel as if they have to justify their fees by making their strategies sound more complex.

"Generally, consulting continues to face that challenge but I think it's improving if only because clients are looking harder at the money they're spending on consultants and so consultants have to make more of an effort."

Grahame Dowling, professor of marketing at the Australian Graduate School of Management, says business babble is mainly used by younger people "as a way for them to differentiate themselves and make themselves feel more confident" and he says the pendulum is swinging back to simpler language. But, he adds, "there's a whole industry that thrives on creating new business babble and you're not going to hose that down".

Some of the most voracious critics of management speak say it's not just that the language is obtuse but it has been applied in areas that it was never designed for and it has been employed in those areas to deceive, conceal and bamboozle.

Rob Watts, who has written internal papers on the subject for RMIT University, suspects the issue goes beyond the penetration of managerialism into the public domain. "It can reflect stupidity but can also reflect bad motives," he says.

Watts, professor of social policy at RMIT, mentions a story about Centrelink, which was encouraging staff to think of an expression that reflected the idea that competition was not necessarily opposed to co-operation. "The word they came up with was 'co-opertition'," he says. "They were trying to fix something with language and thought they could paper over a huge contradiction with a word.

"The public knows there's another agenda with these expressions they know 'customer service' usually means a long wait on the phone and that's why those books are hitting a nerve."

Trevor Cook of Jackson, Wells Morris, says PRs are always wrestling with companies that want to disguise bad news with euphemisms, CEOs who want to sound complex (and pompous), marketing people who want their product to sound new and exciting and lawyers who sound like torts.

What corporate leaders don't realise, Cook says, "is people are inured to this sort of language. They're not fooled by it for a minute, especially young people, because they've been taught to deconstruct everything and they live in a world of open communication".

If the creators of babble are having second thoughts, then so too are some of the institutions that have been the worst offenders. In Watson's book, Death Sentence, three institutions were singled out for their poor communication. Each of the three Optus, RMIT and the Australia Council are aware of their public outing and at least two of them have vowed to change their ways.

When the Weekend AFR rang RMIT's pro-vice chancellor of teaching and learning, Gail Hart, to ask about the university's reputation for conflating the language, she'd just come out of a meeting that had decided to fix it.

"We know it's something we have to address," she says. "The web is our public face, it's where people get a sense of what RMIT is about and when confronted with that sort of language, it does tend to phase them out."

RMIT is devoting funds to revise its website and it's also working on a style guide for staff but Hart fears that it will take time to penetrate into the shorthand language of academia.

"There's a problem in the language of teaching," she says, "in that we take core concepts and keep rebadging them as if they're new. It's a way of making the perennial seem new and fresh. That is understandable because a lot of the funding that comes to universities has been associated with innovations so it entices academics to appear to be innovative."

Hart says she found out how embedded this language is recently when she gave workshops at the Vietnam campus and had to use an interpreter. The process of interpretation, she says, "forced me to be economic with words and use more useful words because the interpreter kept getting tripped up by words such as competencies and capabilities. At the end I had to conclude that I speak a lot but don't say that much".

The tendency to talk a lot about not much at all also plagued the Australia Council. "We were aware of the dubious honour of being quoted in Watson's Death Sentence," says Lisa Colley from the council. "As a public organisation, especially one working in the arts, we need to make sure we don't sound like a securities prospectus or marketing brochure but it's not easy corporate speak is everywhere."

Nevertheless, the council is trying to clean up its communications with its style guide, writing courses for staff and the development of a computer program which suggests "alternatives to lazy language like utilise, implement, best practice and, my least favourite, strategic", Colley adds.

But, as she says, it isn't easy and one institution that has found the effort too much is Optus. After promising to get back to the Weekend AFR with information on what they're doing to combat doublespeak, Optus corporate affairs manager Claire Hosegood sent back an email. "We know clear communication is fundamental to achieving a solid relationship with our customers and so we strive to keep it simple," her message read. A succinct reply but hardly a strategy.

Perhaps the problem with management speak is that it is now so entrenched that few know how to unpick it. Or maybe the users of this language are afraid that once you start unpicking the words from the fabric of their communications, the whole ensemble will fall apart.

Linguist Annabelle Lukin, research fellow at Macquarie University's Centre for Language and Social Life, has tracked the use of language and reviewed Watson's book. She suspects we all know the emperor has no clothes but we're not sure why we ever thought he was clothed and we're not sure how to dress him.

"While Watson is critical of many language uses, he doesn't help people unpack them," she says. "His sense of what grammar is and what it does isn't sophisticated enough. He comes up with a list of words that are problematic but he does nothing for people who want to take some social action".

But surely that is partly the responsibility of linguists to help the community identify nonsense language and then help them rebuild the public dialogue.

RMIT's Watts is one of those who blames "academics, who write in the passive voice and use words only three other people understand". This tendency to confine academic work to an elitist dialogue is one reason Australia doesn't have too many public intellectuals, he says. "There are great people, like Stephen Jay Gould, who have proved it's possible for academics to write well, simply and for a public audience but we don't do it here."

"Of 100 PhDs produced in Australia, only one of those will be ready for publication. That's why we don't have public intellectuals in Australia.'

Lukin concedes a certain neglect on behalf of her colleagues. "It is our failure," she says. "More of us need to learn to talk about language to more diverse audiences. If we want to connect with the questions the public has, then the onus is on us to learn how to talk to them. There's a big space out there to be filled."

Most Hated Words And Phrases

Some of the awful business jargon most frequently used by interviewees:

- accountabilities
- key performance indicators
- benchmarking
- key stakeholders
- downsize
- mapping
- core competencies
- capabilities

- didactic
- continuous improvement
- strategic
- viability
- transformative learning
- utilize
- implementation
- best practice
- customer focused
- going forwards
- value-add
- game plan
- paradigm shift
