



FT.com site : Lucy Kellaway: Uptick in my tolerance of jargon.

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Last month I was called by a publisher and asked if I would like to write a book that would thunder against business jargon and call on all managers to talk like normal human beings, writes **Lucy Kellaway**.

No, I would not like to write such a book, I said. This was partly because writing books is hard work, lonely and not good for those hooked on instant gratification.

It was also because I have been writing columns on the ugliness of jargon for more than a decade and there is no sign that anything I have ever written has encouraged anyone to talk in a more attractive fashion.

The third reason I was not tempted was that this book has already been written - often. Just in the last few months I have been sent four volumes on office jargon, three of which rail against it as one of the evils of modern life. Not only is there no call for yet another book, my views on business jargon can be expressed at rather less than book length.

It seems to me that jargon, like drugs, should be divided into different classes according to how dangerous usage is. Class A jargon is the lethal stuff, the verbal equivalent of crack cocaine. At an analysts' meeting given by a big drinks company recently one of the directors boasted of the company's "global front-end ideation resource". The phrase is toxic not because the words are ugly (although they are) but because of the thought (or lack of thought) behind them. Any business person who talks this way has lost sight of what he or she is supposed to be doing. Had I been at that meeting I would have advised selling the shares promptly.

At the other end of the scale, Class C jargon consists of business words that have now entered the language. These are the equivalent of cannabis but even less harmful - which is just as well given that the spread is unstoppable. Everyone is at risk of succumbing to Class C, even people who are sticklers for correctness.

My colleague Michael Skapinker, who used to write entire columns in the Financial Times raging against phrases such as "to grow profits", "wake-up call" and "double whammy", is now doing a more commercial job, and last week I heard him use the phrase "**uptick** in circulation" as if he had been talking that way all his life. More shockingly, my own mother, a former English teacher and now in her ninth decade, recently used the phrase "to buy in to". And Prince Charles, who one might have hoped would speak the Queen's English as if it were his mother tongue, was interviewed on the radio recently and said "at the end of the day" four times.

Trying to stop the spread of these phrases has the same chance of success as attempts to stop teenagers saying "like" every other word. I tried this at home recently by experimenting with a system of fines. It was a dismal failure.

In between the two extremes, Class B jargon covers all those clunky phrases such as "pushing the envelope" and "blue-sky thinking". All of us have our phrases we particularly dislike. I have just added three new ones to my most hated list. The first is "a big ask". Someone recently tried to get me to do something and prefaced the request with "I know it's a big ask, but would you mind??.??.?" That "ask" suddenly seemed far too big for me and I said that sorry, I did mind.

Ask is a verb, as is learn. Thus "that was a great learn for me" also jars. It was not "a learn" but a lesson and one it would be nice if people could learn.

Yet the word that annoys me most at the moment is "piece". This is fine if it means piece of cake. But it has now come to mean thing and can be tacked on to any adjective: "re the motivational piece, we should be considering??.??.?"

Yet, despite these hateful phrases, I am not proposing a pointless war on Class B jargon. In fact, I am becoming increasingly tolerant towards it. In this I have been swayed by two of the new books, both of which are simply directories of jargon terms. One is from the US and the other is from the UK. The UK volume, Ducks in a Row, an A-Z of Offlish, is written by a frightfully nice man with a PhD from Oxford. In his introduction he writes: "As offlish is highly contagious, it is vital that these people are mocked, ridiculed and undermined in order to prevent its spread." His tone is priggish and leaves me thinking that while I would never say "leading edge" or "run it up the flagpole" myself, it is not the end of the world if others do.

By contrast, the US directory Green Weenies and Due Dilligence, is written by a former scrap-car dealer whose personal motto is "mission possible". Far from ridiculing the language of business, he advises readers that unless they can "talk the talk" they won't be able to "walk the walk". Among the 1,200 terms in there were lots of new ones that were fresh enough to be funny.

I like the phrase "chair plug", which refers to someone who sits in a meeting contributing nothing. I like "inbox dread", which is what you feel before you turn the computer on. There are many more: "sharing teeth" is when there is not enough to go around; and "square-headed girlfriend" is a computer.

People who are already heavy jargon users are beyond help. My advice to those who are not: experiment with Class B jargon and have some fun. Only try not to inhale.

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