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Beijing plans to rid the city's signage of embarrassing translation errors in time for the 2008 Summer Olympics. Visitors will be spared messages such as "Deformed Man" on toilets for the disabled and "Show Mercy to the Slender Grass" on park lawns.

34 percent of respondents to the latest Europe Business Monitor said the British have the best sense of humour and the sharpest wit. Only three percent backed German claims for the accolade... even in Germany!

Because of the soaring number of Polish people in West Sussex, local police officers have been learning Polish phrases. Poles are the fastest growing ethnic community in the area – West Sussex County Council's website even has pages in Polish.

Senior European politicians have called for French to be the official language for all legal texts in the EU in an effort to halt its decline as a working language in Brussels. They argue it is the most precise and analytical European language for legal texts.



Jargonistification

I came across the term 'bulge bracket firms' used by a Boston consultancy in what they called an 'impact-note', (memo?). Apparently the "bulge bracket continues to dominate algorithmic trading and are securing their future with 'straight-through, next-generation analytics'". Now this was an investor consultancy so I should expect some fairly esoteric language but I was still surprised at how little sense I could make of the item. How and why does jargon evolve? Is it the lava flow of new ideas or a linguistic and commercial cul-de-sac? Opinions are polarised. A new study finds that financial jargon stops private investors putting their money into company shares. The Financial Services Authority is calling for more 'plain English'. But, is jargon something you can just legislate away?

Language is intimately connected with identity, who we are, where we are and what we do for a living. And it changes all the time. Read Shakespeare to see how far English has changed since Elizabethan times. Skip further back to Chaucer and for most of us it may as well be Dutch. Jargon is just one part of that constant process of language evolution.

It's easy to see why jargon develops. How much easier is it for a publisher to say 'chick lit' than 'genre fiction aimed at young women'; or for a stockbroker to say 'call' rather than 'an option to buy at a specific price'.

Jargon is a specialised shorthand that generally stays within its own professional boundaries. Fishermen for instance, have a special word for the layer of water just beneath the surface; you won't hear that word on Wall Street.

The more specialised the group the more specialised the jargon. Farmers don't understand fishermen, but fishermen don't understand whalers and blue whalers probably don't understand sperm whalers.

For centuries trade lingos have served to protect vested interest. Outsiders are less of a threat if they can't speak the language. The business world for instance, is liberally peppered with jargon. From the buzzwords no one admits they don't quite understand; the 'glocalizations' and 're-equitisations' to the polite euphemisms as staff are 'downsized', 'rightsized' or 'vocationally relocated'. (Some terms border on the Orwellian. Apparently Chase Manhattan calls the people it lays off 'saves' as in savings in the bank.)

Some business jargon has broken through to the mainstream. Most of us understand what is meant by a 'cash cow' or a 'bull market' but what about an 'elephant hunt' – when a community tries to attract a large corporation into their area; or a 'dead cat bounce' – a stock that rallies after a fall before finally giving up the ghost. For corporate lawyers a hostile takeover bid is a 'bear hug', its target an 'iron maiden' and a rescuing bid, a 'white knight'. Small wonder a recent report said that more than six out of 10 Britons are baffled by financial terminology.

"A lot of words and phrases need to be consigned to the rubbish bin" says Andrew Black of Standard Life.

Just to reinforce the point, here's an extract from a speech by Alan Greenspan former US Federal Reserve Chairman which resists textual analysis.

"It is a tricky problem to find the particular calibration in timing that would be appropriate to stem the acceleration in risk premiums created by falling incomes without prematurely aborting the decline in the inflation-generated risk premiums."

Regular viewers of The West Wing will have met some familiar sounding jargon on Capitol Hill. American Senators unwilling to commit to supporting a bill will 'hang loose' maybe hoping to be 'let off the hook' altogether if enough supporters 'go into the tank'. The British Parliament also preserves a rich vein of unintelligible language as part of our constitutional heritage.

Security services are good at jargon, especially the kind devised to sanitise. The term 'final solution' was only ever used by the inner circle of top Nazis. It identified the elite as well as masked their intentions. In the same way today 'political assassination' has become 'wet work', 'body bags' are renamed 'transfer tubes' and the invasion of Grenada in 83 was a classified as a 'pre-dawn vertical insertion'. When the CIA's bureaucratic euphemism for murder 'terminate with extreme prejudice' became widely known outside the 'agency' it was morphed, first into the acronym TWEP then into the derivative verb 'to twep' or 'tweping'.

"Political language – and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists – is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable."
George Orwell 1946

One of the compelling arguments against jargon in the new global economy is that people in niches get stuck. Technology breakthroughs, in biotech and nanotech and digital media etc. come about when different specialities pool knowledge. If they're going to share, they need to speak a common language.

Commercially inconvenient perhaps, but jargon won't just evaporate on command. Some falls away, some sticks to its tribal domain, but some shrugs off its original context and migrates into common speech. For instance, in the eighteenth century people who 'knew the ropes' and would see things through 'to the bitter end' would have to be sailors. They're all old naval expressions. (The anchor cable was attached to the bits; when it was fully played out it had reached the 'bitter end'). Migration to common speech, 'semantic diffusion' to linguists, is always 'touch and go' (You know! When the bottom of the boat hits a sandbank but doesn't stick.).

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metalexis
technical translation

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Jargonification

New words face a hostile jury. Many people believe the dictionary is the Debrett's Peerage of words. Only 'proper' words, those with a decent background, get into The Oxford English or The Merriam-Webster; if a word can't be found in the dictionary it probably shouldn't be used at all. Sticklers will always claim that a 'perfectly good' word already exists. The general public also tend to avoid new words, especially when they're favoured by the young. But being used is exactly how words get into the dictionary in the first place. Lexicographers are the late arrivals at the birth.

When a new word reaches a certain 'tipping point' it breaks through. The New Oxford American Dictionary recently announced their "Word of the Year" was 'podcast'. Erin McKean, editor in chief, said: "Podcast was considered for inclusion last year, but not enough people were using it.". The runners up by the way, included 'bird flu' and 'squick' (to cause immediate revulsion).

Some new words are coined straight from someone's imagination with a clear purpose and a specific definition. Sometimes these fresh arrivals carry some linguistic baggage with them; 'Hobbit' was based on Rabbit for instance and 'Quark' was borrowed from a description of quacking ducks in Finnegans Wake.

Other times new words spring virgin pure; 'meme' for instance, invented in 1976 by Richard Dawkins to denote a unit of cultural information and 'googol' meaning a 1 followed by 100 zeros, coined in 1938 by a nine-year-old boy before being co-opted as a 21st century mega-brand.

Brand names are a good source of new words. Some brands give their name to a whole product category. We ask Electrolux for a 'Hoover' or Braun for a 'Thermos'. Aspirin, Kleenex, Elastoplast. Being a 'generonym' is no guarantee of commercial success though – few people who buy a 'Biro' care who made it. 'Tabloid' was coined in 1884 for a new line of tiny, highly concentrated pills.

Words are invented to describe sounds or things that make sounds, like 'splash' and 'plop'. They also replicate sounds, 'mish-mash' and 'ping-pong'. New words also arise out of old acronyms, ones that have shrugged off their longer winded roots: 'radar', 'yuppy' and 'scuba', for example.

Blends or 'portmanteau' words combine two original words - usually the beginning and the end - to create a new one. 'By' + 'cause' becomes 'because', 'flame' + 'glare' becomes 'flare', 'fourteen' + 'night' becomes 'fortnight' etc.

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The capacity for contrast and irony make blend words a favourite for witty word coiners. For Spinal Tap the 'documentary' becomes the 'rockumentary' or, in the hands of Louis Theroux, the 'mockumentary'. Mostly the meaning is obvious; 'televangelist' and 'dancercise'. Others are not so clear, 'Cubonics' (the combining of Cuban Spanish and English) or 'acrobranching' (acrobatics in trees).

New words filter up from street slang or down from professional jargon. Some erupt spontaneously, almost magically and flourish as long as they serve our needs. The word 'prioritise' for instance, was first used in an American Presidential campaign of the 1960s – It's already difficult to imagine life without it. Proper English, jargon, slang or lingo; who cares? Only one in ten will survive for any length of time and even fewer will make it into the dictionary. The ones that last are the ones that best communicate changing ideas in a changing world – it's all English.

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references & further reading

The Wall Street Journal

English – Its life and times
Robert Claiborne
Bloomsbury

Politics and the English Language
George Orwell 1946



Wall St lexicon

Hedge
Generally used to mean offsetting a position. It can also refer to protecting a profit.

Head Fake
Organised by a market maker to feign strength before a ditch. The same happens in the other direction, with apparent weakness being used as a buying opportunity by the knowing party.

Teenager
A derogatory term used for a stock which used to trade in higher realms but has fallen back to the teens.

Noon Swoon
A sell-off that occurs when volume is thinnest but can end just as quickly as it began. A close relative of the noon balloon.

Window Dressing
Showing the Mutual Fund Holders what they want to see.

Put
A put is an option contract which gives the holder the right to sell at a predetermined price before a stated expiration date.

Strike price
An option contract states the price at which the security can be bought/sold if exercised. This price is the strike price.

Uptick
The term uptick is used to explain the change in price in a security when the last trade occurred at a higher price than the previous trade. In others words, the security ticked up.

The best medicine

Humour is vital to communication and the more we understand about how people's culture and background affect their sense of humour, the better we'll be able to communicate. The following notes are from The Scientific Quest for the World's Funniest Joke.

Three reasons we find jokes funny:

1. They make us feel superior, by depicting others as silly or stupid.
2. They reduce the impact of anxiety-provoking situations, stuff that we'd otherwise avoid – death, sex, marriage, bodily functions etc..
3. They surprise us with incongruity, puns and word-play.

Apparently, people from Ireland, the UK, Australia and New Zealand most enjoy jokes involving word plays.

A white horse goes into a pub and orders a drink. The publican says, "Hey! We have a drink named after you!" The horse says, "What, Eric?"

Europeans prefer jokes that make light of uncomfortable topics.

A patient goes to see his Doctor, "Doctor, last night I made a Freudian slip. We were having dinner with my mother-in-law and I meant to say: 'Please pass the butter' "But I slipped and said: 'You stupid cow, you've completely ruined my life'."

top German joke.
Scientists have shown that the moon is moving away from the Earth at a tiny but measurable distance each year. If you do the maths, you can calculate that 65 million years ago the moon was orbiting the earth at a distance of about 35 feet from the Earth's surface. This would explain the death of the dinosaurs – the tall ones, anyway.

top American joke
Two friends playing golf one day. One of them is about to chip onto the green when he sees a long funeral procession on the road next to the course. He stops in mid-swing, takes off his golf cap, closes his eyes, and bows his head in prayer. 'Wow! that's the most touching and thoughtful thing I've ever seen' says his friend. "You're a wonderful man." 'Yeah, well', The man shrugs, 'we were married for 35 years.'

top French joke
You're a high priced lawyer! If I give you 1000 euros, will you answer two questions for me? Absolutely! What's the second question.

top UK joke
A woman gets on a bus with her baby. The bus driver exclaims: "That's the ugliest baby that I've ever seen." The woman goes to the rear of the bus, fuming. "That driver just insulted me!" She says to a man next to her. "You go right up there and tell him off" the man says, "Go on, go ahead, I'll hold your monkey for you."



Newly coined 'BlackBerry thumb' relates to an ailment associated with one of the latest electronic devices of the noughties: the BlackBerry handheld PDA and its potential cause of a type of repetitive strain injury.

Fresh Ghoti... very fishy.

Ghoti, pronounced: fish.
gh as in laugh: f
o as in women: i
ti as in action: sh

This example of the vaguaries of English pronunciation has been bandied around for a long time but has never been correct. Gh is only pronounced "f" if it's at the end of a word; at the beginning; like in ghost or ghastly, it's a hard g.

O is pronounced 'i' in just one single word in the whole English language – women. "ti" is only pronounced "sh" if it's followed by "on" at the end of a word: "-tion"). So, ghoti is 'goaty' and could never be pronounced 'fish'. Sorry.

Letters to the Editor

...interesting piece about the origins of English. Since reading it I'm much more aware of how my choice of words is unconsciously affected by who I'm talking to. I'd always prefer 'herds of cows' to 'cohorts of bovines', but in interviews I do find myself majestically 'proceeding' rather than merely 'going' somewhere.
R. Willetts.

A friend of mine used to work in the dockyard. Skinny boned and unlikely to ever bulk up he was inspired by the The Reader's Digest's 'Improve Your Word Power' to use long Latin words in place of brawn. You can completely unman a hefty stevedore by telling him he's "vilely vituperative" or hopelessly 'jejune' he claimed. I never felt inclined to put that claim to the test so took him at his word.
PE.

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