

THE JARGON DISEASE

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I once received an invitation to lecture at "The University of Excellence". I forget where this particular academy was located - Jordan, I think - but I recall very clearly that the suggested subject of my talk was as incomprehensible to me as it would, no doubt, have been to any audience. Invitation rejected. Only this week I received another request, this time to join "ethics practitioners" to "share evidence-based practices on dealing with current ethical practices" around the world. What on earth does this mean? Why do people write like this?

The word "excellence", of course, has long ago been devalued by the corporate world - its favorite expression has long been "Quality and Excellence", invariably accompanied by a "mission statement", that claims to self-importance dreamed up by Robin Cook when foreign secretary - swiftly ditched when he decided to go on selling jets to Indonesia - and thereafter by every export company and amateur newspaper in the world.

There is something repulsive about this vocabulary, an aggressive language of superiority in which "key players" can "interact" with each other, can "impact" society, "outsource" their business - or "downsize" the number of their employees. They need "feedback" and "input". They think "outside the box" or "push the envelope". They have a "workspace", not a desk. They need "personal space" - they need to be left alone - and sometimes they need "time and space", a commodity much in demand when marriages are failing.

These lies and obfuscations are infuriating. "Downsizing" employees means firing them; "outsourcing" means hiring someone else to do your dirty work. "Feedback" means "reaction", and "input" means "advice". Thinking "outside the box" means, does it not, to be "imaginative"?

Being a "key player" is a form of self-aggrandizement - which is why I never agree to be a "key speaker", especially if this means participation in a "workshop". To me, a workshop means what it says. When I was at school, the workshop was a carpentry shop wherein generations of teachers vainly tried to teach Fisk how to make a wooden chair or table that did not collapse the moment it

was completed. But today, a "workshop" - though we mustn't say so - is a group of tiresome academics yakking in the secret language of anthropology or talking about "cultural sensitivity" or "core issues" or "tropes".

Presumably, these are the same folk who invented the UN's humanitarian-speak. Of the latter, my favorite is the label awarded to any desperate refugee who is prepared (for a pittance) to persuade their fellow victims to abide by the UN's wishes - to abandon their tents and return to their dangerous, war-ravaged homes. These luckless advisers are referred to by the UN as "social animators".

It is a disease, this language, caught by one of our own New Labour ministers on the BBC last week when he talked about "environmental externalities". Presumably, this meant "the weather". Similarly, an architect I know warned his client of the effect of the "aggressive saline environment" on a house built near the sea. If this advice seems obscure, we might be "conflicted" about it - who, I ask myself, invented the false reflexive verb? - or, worse still, "stressed". In northern Iraq in 1991, I was once ordered by a humanitarian worker from the "International Rescue Committee" to leave the only room I could find in the wrecked town of Zakho because it had been booked for her fellow workers - who were very "stressed". Pour souls, I thought. They were stressed, "stressed out", trying - no doubt - to "come to terms" with their predicament, attempting to "cope".

This is the language of therapy, in which frauds, liars, and cheats are always trying to escape. Thus, President Clinton's spokesman claimed after his admission of his affair with Monica Lewinsky that he was "seeking closure". Like so many mendacious politicians, Clinton felt - as Lord Blair of Kut al-Amara will no doubt feel about his bloodbath in Iraq once he leaves No 10 - the need to "move on".

In the same way, our psycho-babble masters and mistresses - yes, there is a semantic problem there, too, isn't there? - announce after wars that it is a time for "healing", the same prescription doled out to families which are "dysfunctional", and who live in a "dystopian" world. Yes, dystopian is a perfectly good word - it is the opposite of utopian - but like "perceive" and

"perception" (words once much loved by Jonathan Dimbleby) - they have become fashionable because they appear enigmatic.

Some newly popular phrases, such as "tipping point" - used about Middle East conflicts when the bad guys are about to lose - or "big picture" - when moralists have to be reminded of the greater good - are merely fashionable. Others are simply odd. I always mixed up "bonding" with "bondage" and "quality time" with a popular assortment of toffees. I used to think that "increase" was a perfectly acceptable word until I discovered that in the military sex-speak of the Pentagon, Iraq would endure a "spike" of violence until a "surge" of extra troops arrived in Baghdad.

All this is different, of course, from the non-sexual "no-brainers" with which we now have to "cope" - "author" for "authoress", for example, "actor" for "actress" - or the fearful linguistic lengths we must go to avoid offense to Londoners who speak Cockney: as well all know - though only those of us, of course, who come from the Home Counties - these people speak "Estuary" English. It's like those poor Americans in Detroit who, in fear and trepidation, avoided wishing me a happy Christmas. "Happy Holiday!" they chorused until I roared "Happy Christmas" back. In Beirut, by the way, we all wish each other "Happy Christmas" and "Happy Eid", whether our friends are Muslim or Christian. Is this really of "major importance", as an Irish television producer once asked a colleague at a news event?

I fear it is. For we are not using words anymore. We are utilizing them, speaking for effect rather than meaning, for escape. We are becoming - as The New Yorker now describes children who don't care if they watch films on the cinema screen or their mobile phones - "platform agnostic". What, Polonius asked his lord, was he reading? "Words, words, words," Hamlet replied. If only...